

for the ones who need a hand

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by [hujwernoo](#)

Summary

In the five and a half years since landing in the apocalypse, Five has learned a lot. Some of it is predictable, like learning how to repair cars and machines and bicycles and - everything, really. Rationing his food to strike the best balance between making it last and giving him enough nutrients. Taking care of his socks, possibly the most important article of clothing he can wear. Cabin fever can strike even a person who couldn't go outside the house for their first decade of life. How to be an only child.

But there are the things that he could never have predicted, like the rushing excitement of playing a stupid game that never has a clear winner. The cleansing feeling of apologizing for his failures. Sitting next to the love of his life as they watch the sunset together. How to be a little brother.

All seems to be going well for Five and Klaus, until tragedy strikes. And in the middle of the apocalypse, there is little margin for error.

Notes

Hello again, everybody! Here I am with the second chaptered story of this series. Just to reassure everyone: I HAVE THE ENTIRE STORY WRITTEN ALREADY. In fact, I'm about a third of the way through the *next* story already. I have no idea how I've become this motivated, but nobody say anything, you might scare it away.

I'll be posting on a M/W/F schedule, and I figured it's *technically* Friday already, so here you all go. Please tell me how amazing I am, I am shamelessly addicted to comments.

And so, without further ado, I present: CHAPTER ONE.

- Translation into Français available: [TRAD - for the one who need a hand](#) by [Loclo4](#)

Chapter 1

Five teleports to the crumbling roof of what used to be a restaurant and surveys the surrounding area. Bleak desolation, as per the norm, but Five keeps his guard up.

The silence is almost suffocating, and Five's nerves are on edge. His ears strain for any hint of sound, and he swivels his head back and forth, back and forth, so as to catch the barest movement.

Something flickers in the corner of his eye, and Five all but throws himself off the roof, teleporting to the street below. Looking up, he sees that it was just a scrap of fabric blowing in the breeze. Five doesn't relax, though, teleporting inside the nearest building. The walls are sagging and shabby, but even if the structural integrity fails he has a lot of practice at teleporting quickly.

Not quickly enough however - there's the faintest whisper of sound behind him and Five is midway through disappearing when a hand catches his elbow and a cheery voice rings out, "Tag!"

Five aborts the jump and whirls to face Klaus, hand outstretched. Klaus has the gall to wink at him before popping out of visibility. Five's hand goes through empty air.

Five snarls. He stomps outside.

Klaus appears again, twenty feet away, as per the rules. He waves at Five. "You know, as much as I love you, please know that I mean it from the bottom of my heart when I say your reaction time *sucks*. Gonna have to be faster than that, *mein bruder*," he taunts.

Five glares at him, knowing that despite how fast he could jump over there, Klaus can go incorporeal just the slightest bit faster.

"Oh, I will be," Five promises darkly, and jumps away.

The rules of the game (creatively dubbed 'Ghost Tag' by Klaus) are simple - when Klaus is It, he has to be corporeal anytime he's within twenty feet of Five. When Five is It, Klaus has to be corporeal anytime he's further than twenty feet from Five. The goal is to Tag each other, just like the normal version, but when one person can teleport and the other can go incorporeal at will it becomes much more of a stealth-and-ambush operation. Five won't admit that he finds the whole thing fun, because the ostensible purpose is to train his powers, but...yeah, it's pretty fun.

In the five and a half years since landing in the apocalypse, Five has learned a lot. Some of it is predictable, like learning how to repair cars and machines and bicycles and - everything, really. Rationing his food to strike the best balance between making it last and giving him enough nutrients. Taking care of his socks, possibly the most important article of clothing he can wear. Cabin fever can strike even a person who couldn't go outside the house for their first decade of life. How to be an only child.

But there are the things that he could never have predicted, like the rushing excitement of playing a stupid game that never has a clear winner. The cleansing feeling of apologizing for his failures. Sitting next to the love of his life as they watch the sunset together. How to be a little brother.

It's not something he's ever pictured, being the younger sibling. Aside from the fact that he and his siblings are *literally* the exact same age, Five has always felt like the (metaphorically) older one. He's the smartest one by far, he's incredibly good with his powers, he excelled in every single stupid little test their father threw at them. He made it his personal mission to protect them, whether it be drawing Reginald's attention towards himself or learning how to time travel to undo their deaths.

Except then his most dumbass brother came along and revealed that his powers lasted *well* beyond death, and had a few nifty add-ons that made him basically the perfect apocalypse survivor. What's more, he made it *his* personal mission to be the older brother he always teased he was.

Klaus saved Five's sanity. Five can admit that now. Klaus threw himself into taking care of Five, even when he couldn't do more than become visible for a few minutes per day. He cajoled and pleaded and occasionally threatened for Five to *live*, not just survive, and once he became capable he made it happen himself. Sometimes against Five's very vocal protests. In the end, however, Five can admit that it was for the best.

There's more to life than just surviving. And even though it sometimes doesn't feel like it, that's what Five is doing.

Five jumps to the roof of the restaurant again, and scans the surroundings. There's a very good chance Klaus found somewhere he can just hole up until the setting sun forces them to head home. It's a favorite tactic of his.

Five jumps to another roof. This one creaks alarmingly, so he jumps back to the street. That one strains him, and Five stumbles as he hits the ground. He takes deep, even breaths, and steadies himself. His cooldown period has been shortening, but only by seconds. Five curses the limitations of his power nearly as much as he tries to circumvent them, but the only cure seems to be practice, and a lot of it.

He looks around. The street is bombed out and wrecked, past recognition even if he *did* know where this was pre-apocalypse. Five takes out his map and squints at it. It takes some searching to locate a fallen street sign, but once he does it's easy to pinpoint his location.

Klaus could probably say where they are off the top of his head - there's not much else for him to do when Five sleeps except for exploring the city - but it always itches at Five when he loses track of where he is. Possibly an instinct stemming from his power, possibly an instinct learned living in a wasteland, possibly just a him thing, probably a mix of all three. Since Five is It, he can dally for a while.

There's hardly any warning.

The only thing he hears is a creak. It catches his attention. Scrambling among unstable architecture for the past five and a half years has taught Five to be alert to any minute shifts or sounds in his environment. Nearly being buried under rubble several times has given him plenty of reason to be on his guard when he's out in the city. So when he hears the sound, he instantly turns to check it out.

It's *almost* enough.

Because the building, the half-standing one he just jumped from, the one that couldn't take his weight, is suddenly falling in a cascade of wreckage, a shower of stone and plaster, and it's *roaring* down on top of him and Five reaches to jump and

isn't

quite

fast

enough.

There's a sound.

Five can't tell what the sound is. It's too far away, too muffled. He wants the sound to go away. It's annoying.

But the sound won't go away. It keeps repeating, rising and falling in pitch, but mostly rising.

It's *loud*.

It won't go away.

Five tries to bat at the sound, but it doesn't stop. A small part of his mind points out that this is because he didn't manage to move a single muscle.

There's something - touching him?

No, his mind corrects him. Someone. There's a link between the sound and whoever is touching him, probably. He thinks. He's not sure why he thinks that, but it feels right.

It doesn't mean he likes the sound. He still wants it to stop.

He tries to say this. '*Go away.*'

The most he can manage is a wheeze.

The sound becomes clearer for a brief moment, and he hears -

"- oh god, oh god, Five, stay with me, please, god, Five, you're okay, you're okay, it's alright, just stay with me, please, you're alright, please, please, no, no, nononono -"

'What are you talking about?' Five tries to say. *'Of course I won't leave. I promised.'*

Instead, he slips away into blackness.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: blood, injury, etc. You're gonna be seeing that warning a lot during this story.

Klaus might be panicking.

Scratch that, he is *absolutely* panicking. Five is lying in front of him, bleeding and unconscious, oh god his right arm is *shredded*, and Klaus' hands can only stem so much of the blood. It's bubbling up between his fingers no matter how hard he presses, and Five is bleeding from half a dozen places and Klaus is pretty sure legs are not supposed to bend that way and who even knows if he has head trauma, oh god.

Klaus is vaguely aware of the constant stream of babble coming out of his mouth, but he has more important things to do than try and figure out what he's saying. His brother is hurt - oh god, his brother is *dying* right in front of him.

Almost hysterically, Klaus wonders if this is what Luther went through, when he went on that mission with Ben but came back alone. If so, Klaus regrets every single time he was ever mean to Luther, no matter how much the big lunk deserved it.

Five is still unconscious and Klaus is pretty sure that's a bad thing. Not as bad as the blood spreading across the broken, dusty ground, unless it is. Everything is jumpy for some reason, razor-sharp and yet distantly disjointed. Klaus tries to *think*, to figure out what he should do, but it's so much harder when he's not sitting in the infirmary reading a textbook and instead has his little brother bleeding out in front of him.

Bleeding, a small, cool voice whispers in the back of Klaus' mind. *Stop the bleeding.*

He's *trying*!

Use his clothes. Make a tourniquet, the voice says patiently, and oh thank fucking god Klaus spent so long rereading the sections on how to handle trauma and triage that he can remember them even now.

Klaus scrambles to tear off Five's shirt. He has to take his hands off of Five's arm to do it, and blood surges forth. Oh god, there's so much. Did it open up an artery?

By some miracle, Five's shirt tears easily - Klaus has been nagging him to get more clothes, and the thought hits him that he'll definitely need more after this. Klaus will have to help him out with the selection.

Because it'll happen. Five will be fine. He'll be fine and heal up and they'll go 'shopping' together and Klaus will bring over the most ridiculous outfits he can find just to make Five laugh, which will happen because Five will be *fine*. They'll go to Gimbel's. Delores will probably like seeing her old home.

Klaus gets the bloody strip of fabric wound tightly around Five's arm. He grabs blindly and finds a piece of rebar (oh god what if it had fallen two feet to the left, Five would've been impaled clean through) and makes a tourniquet and *twists* it as hard as he can. Klaus uses his free hand to press on the second-largest wound he can find.

Five lets out a soft moan.

Klaus freezes. "Five?"

There's silence. Five stays infuriatingly unconscious.

Klaus wants to cry.

Except if he does that he'll probably misjudge something and Five will die. Klaus pulls on the energy inside of him and throws it into the general area around his eyes. He doesn't start crying, even though he really, really wants to, so it probably worked.

He's still talking, he realizes. Reassurances, mostly, interspersed with the occasional begging. Frankly, it's too much effort to stop himself, so he tunes it out and focuses on Five.

The wounds are - maybe not bleeding so much? God, Klaus prays they aren't. The tourniquet is soaked through, along with the entirety of Five's right arm and most of the surrounding ground, but the puddle isn't growing any larger. Klaus gives the tourniquet another twist and puts even more pressure on the other wounds.

Klaus isn't sure how long they're there. The minutes blur into hours, and the sun sets at some point, but the only thing important enough to pay attention to is the stuttering sound of Five's breathing. Klaus' nonexistent heart nearly stops every time there's a hitch, and if he needed to breathe anymore he would have hyperventilated himself unconscious long ago. There is nothing more important than holding Five's wounds closed, praying to any god that might be listening that he just keeps breathing, please keep breathing.

Klaus knows he needs to do something. Five needs the things back at the library, needs stitches and antibiotics and actual fucking *medical supplies*. But Klaus is still holding the tourniquet, and he can't seem to unglue his hand from Five's side, and the thought of *leaving* Five here while Klaus races to the library and pulls out as many supplies as he can carry and races back in the mad hope that Five won't bleed out in the meantime is so profoundly horrifying that he rejects it immediately.

So he stays, and keeps his hands steady, and talks.

Klaus can't get tired, now.

It's a side effect of being a ghost. He remembers what it was like to have a physical body that got tired, because now that he doesn't have it any more he realizes that he was *always* tired. Exhausted, really. The ghosts, the drugs, even his damn family all weighed on him so heavily he felt like sinking into the earth to join the corpses every single day. He just didn't consciously realize it.

Dying solved half the problem, and the apocalypse solved the other half. Now that he doesn't have a body any more, he couldn't take in drugs if he tried - and it also dealt with those pesky withdrawal symptoms, so Klaus is pretty sure he came out on top of that one. The apocalypse wiped out all the ghosts, which would be fucking fantastic if only Ben were still here.

Klaus - doesn't quite *vacillate* on his opinion of his family. He just flips between different facets of how he sees them, and all of them are equally as real at the same time. It's a chaotic mess, rather similar to himself, and the only difference is in how exhausting it is to feel it all.

Klaus loves his family. He's not sure he likes them very much, even Ben, but he loves them. He always, always has.

Five, though, has managed to defy all the odds (again). Klaus never once seriously thought of being an older brother to any of his siblings, no matter how much he teased Five and Ben and Vanya about the number orders, but the apocalypse and Five's arrival changed *that*.

It says a lot that Klaus only managed to become a big brother when he's dead and one of the last two people left on Earth, but he *did* manage it. What's more, he *enjoys* it. Klaus never thought being responsible for another human being would be in any way enjoyable or feasible - for fuck's sake, he wasn't even responsible enough to take care of *himself*, Ben had to do it most of the time. But, well, needs must, and even if Klaus didn't like Five he still loved him.

Except then he grew to like him too.

It sort of snuck up on him. One day, nearly three and a half years ago now, Klaus was just perfecting the rules of Ghost Tag when he realized that he was *willingly trying to spend time with Five*. Not because it would be conducive to Five's mental health, or because they both needed to train their powers, or because Klaus was bored, but simply because he wanted to spend time with his brother.

So. Maybe it's not so much the fact that he doesn't have a body any more. Maybe he doesn't get tired any longer because all the things that made him tired are gone.

It's an incredibly depressing thought, that he's almost certainly happier dead in the apocalypse than he was at any time in life. He's already resolved never to mention it to Five.

Klaus looks down at his hands again, and the crusty, dried brown of Five's blood.

Well. He *was* happy, anyways.

Should have known it'd all go to hell.

Klaus prevents tears from falling again.

And then Five shifts.

Klaus freezes, and his thoughts come to a screeching halt. He stares at Five, and is rewarded when Five's eyelids flutter slightly.

"Five?" he says, barely a whisper.

And Five's eyes open.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The first thought in Five's mind is confusion.

He's - lying down? On his back? There's darkness all around him, but when he untangles the fact that his eyes must be closed and tries to open them, he can't. Most of his body is numb, but the places he can feel are grimy, the kind of dirty that sinks into his skin and takes hours to wash away. He hates that kind of grime, gets rid of it whenever it crops up as soon as possible. There are faint signals being reported to his brain about the state and positions of his limbs, but they're contradictory and distant and Five couldn't say with any certainty what's going on with his body at the moment.

Five doesn't like being confused. Hates it, in fact. It always makes him feel stupid, a reminder of being small and powerless and scared, the reality of living under Reginald Hargreeves' thumb. Knowledge is power, and no one knows that better than Five. Once upon a time, he thought that knowledge could take him and his siblings away from their father, if only he was smart enough to figure out time travel.

Well. He got half his wish granted. In the worst way possible. And Five can't help but think to himself that if he'd been smarter, more knowledgeable, he wouldn't have fucked it all up so badly. He would've been able to get back to his family already. There are times when the numbers swim in front of his eyes after working on a single equation for a week straight and he breaks down because *he doesn't get it, why doesn't he understand, why can't he do it*.

Those are the times when Klaus has to bodily pick him up and hold him for an hour or two until he calms down, before dragging him out into the city to show him some interesting ruin or look at the stars or play Ghost Tag.

It helps.

"Five?"

And that's - that's Klaus. That's Klaus speaking, and Five relaxes, because if Klaus is here then it's okay.

Five tries to open his eyes, and this time he succeeds.

The sight of the night sky greets him. It's pretty overcast tonight, but nothing like the first couple years, when the skies and air were choked with ashes. There's a few patches of stars

visible, and a nearly full moon is silhouetted behind the clouds.

Klaus is staring at him, and -

Okay, maybe something *is* wrong.

Because Five can't remember - wait, no, he *can* remember the last time Klaus looked like this. It was when he finally came clean about Ben's death, just over four and a half years ago. He looks the same way now he did then, shattered and small and scared. This time, though, there's a wild, desperate edge to him, something that immediately puts Five on high alert.

"Kl's?" Five says, and frowns when his mouth refuses to work properly.

"Five," Klaus breathes, and oh fuck, what *happened*, Five *knows* that tone of voice, it's the same one *he* used when he first confirmed Klaus was real, the one that says the speaker was half-dead before but suddenly sees a way to keep living.

Five opens his mouth again, determined to wrangle his tongue into submission and make it *work properly* because Klaus is *hurting* and Five doesn't know *what's going on*, but Klaus interrupts him before he can get a sound out.

"Hey, hey, don't talk, don't talk, okay? Just stay still."

Five closes his mouth and does so. There are certainly times when he doesn't listen to Klaus, either because his ideas are terrible and outlandish or just because he's not as smart as Five, but this is not one of those times. Klaus clearly understands what's going on better than Five, and Five trusts him.

"Okay, okay, good. Now, just - blink once for yes, twice for no. Got it?"

Five blinks once. Klaus doesn't lose that terrified, desperate look, but his shoulders relax just a fraction.

"Great, that's great. You're doing great. So, uh, do you remember what happened?"

Five strains to recall, but eventually gives up and blinks twice.

"Oh. Well." Klaus looks horribly awkward. "That's. Uh. Well, basically, you got on the wrong side of a building. As in, the underside."

Five blinks, in surprise this time, and several things slot together. The way he's lying down, the fear in Klaus' eyes, the odd numbness across most of his body.

This is...bad. Five knows it's bad. Not so much by how he feels, but by looking at Klaus' face and seeing the way he's looking at Five. It's entirely possible that Five's life is at risk.

The thought doesn't provoke the amount of emotion it probably should. Five might be in shock.

“Right,” Klaus says, once the silence has stretched out. “So. I’ve been keeping you from bleeding, and it’s been -” Klaus looks around helplessly. “- a while? I guess? But, uh. I don’t really want to go get the supplies and stuff because I don’t know if you’ll start bleeding again if I stop keeping pressure on you.”

Five tries to think. It’s what he’s good at, coming up with a plan, far better than Luther because no plan survives contact with the enemy but Five *knows* that, and can take it into account. Luther can’t, not really. Except now Five’s train of thought is all muddled and he’s not entirely sure he can take in all the factors he needs to, be aware of all of his options and evaluate them accordingly. He hates it when that happens.

Klaus needs to get medical supplies. Five knows that. He’ll almost definitely die if all Klaus does is sit here keeping pressure on his wounds. But he’ll probably also die if Klaus is gone too long, and Five can’t remember exactly how long it’ll take Klaus to make it to base and back but he has the vague feeling the answer is somewhere around ‘too damn long’.

So. The goal is to keep Five stable long enough for Klaus to get back. Five has a feeling that ripped cloth isn’t going to cut it. What else do they have?

Rubble. Mountains and mountains of rubble. None of which is very useful, so Five dismisses that.

Five’s pack contains the remnants of lunch, a small first-aid kit with not nearly enough supplies to treat more than a few scratches or so (he needs to fix that, stupid of him to get cocky), a jacket, water bottle, some lipstick he thought Delores would like, a flare -

A flare.

Five feels a frisson of energy run through him. He opens his mouth and manages to croak out “Flare.”

“Huh?” Klaus asks, frowning.

“Flare,” Five repeats. His throat feels like he’s been swallowing gravel, and his tongue still isn’t entirely under his control, but he forces the words out with sheer stubbornness. “In m’ bag. Cau-ter-ize.”

It takes Klaus a few seconds to work out what he means, and then he reels back. “*Fuck no!*”

Five is not exactly looking forward to it himself, but it’s the best chance they have. The only logical option. Five tries to convey that through the strength of his glare alone, because stuttering it out between labored breaths probably wouldn’t do anything to convince Klaus.

But Klaus has built up a truly annoying immunity to Five’s glares over the years. He shakes his head. “No fucking way! I’m not - no!”

Five hisses out between his teeth. Summoning up a strength he didn’t know was possible, Five *forces* his left hand to reach up and grasp onto Klaus’ arm. His grip could be broken by a slight breeze, but Klaus freezes like it’s a manacle.

Klaus stares at him, inhumanly still. It's hard to notice consciously, even more so because Klaus is nearly always in vibrant, perpetual motion, but when he decides to stop moving he could genuinely be mistaken for a statue. He doesn't need to breathe or blink, wind doesn't affect him unless he lets it, and the tiny, minute corrections in balance don't happen because he doesn't have a physical body. Klaus can stay utterly, perfectly still for as long as he cares to, and that includes not closing his eyes. Being stared at by him is a bit unnerving.

Five can't win a staring contest with his brother. Luckily, they're not having one.

"I'll. Die." Five grits out between clenched teeth. "Do. It."

Five glares challengingly at Klaus, although the effect is ruined slightly by how he keeps blinking heavily.

Klaus finally moves - his jaw twitches, and he looks away.

"Alright," he whispers.

Five's hand falls from his arm. Five feels drained, and he's starting to regain feeling in a few of his extremities. He ignores the slowly increasing pain signals - still distant, but growing closer - and says, "Go."

Klaus takes a deep breath, something left over from being alive, and closes his eyes. Then he opens them and looks to the side. Probably where Five's pack is.

There's silence for a moment, then Klaus sets his jaw and disappears.

Five doesn't feel anything right away. For the first couple seconds, Klaus' disappearance makes no difference, and that's long enough to get his hopes up that the wounds have stopped bleeding.

Then he feels a sort of a pins-and-needles sensation on his right arm, and the pain hits just as Klaus scrambles back over with his pack.

Five hisses, and does his best to hold back anything louder. It's still not the worst pain he's ever experienced, but it's steadily increasing and he knows there's a mountain in the process of falling down on him.

"Hurry," he tries to say, but he's not sure it comes out right. He's not at the right angle to see Klaus, but there's a loud ripping noise (did he rip the pack open? Five *liked* that pack!) and a second later a familiar *fwoosh!*

"Sorry, Five," Klaus says shakily, and Five tries to brace himself, he really does, but a moment later his entire right arm turns into *pain*, and he might manage to stay silent for a second or two but it *hurts*, it's *everything*, blotting out the entire world, and nothing else matters but everything crashing down on him all at once in a cascade of broken bones and torn skin and burning flesh and no no no please make it stop make it stop *Klaus please* -

This time, falling unconscious is a blessing.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings: blood, injury, cauterization of a wound.

....I really am sorry about this chapter. I posted a fluffy drabble about ghost tag yesterday, you should go read that now.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Guess what? I'm about 60% done with the next story. Who's the greatest?

Klaus can't actually fly, but he sure as fuck gives it his best goddamn try as he races back to Five.

The bulky medical kit in his arms is heavy, stuffed with literally anything he could get his hands on. He's pretty sure he's going to spend several days picking up the mess he made of the infirmary, but that isn't really any kind of concern at the moment. The only important thing is getting back to Five. Five, who is bleeding and broken and unconscious and *oh god he pressed a burning hot flare on his brother's skin oh god what the fuck -*

Klaus is so fucking glad he doesn't sleep anymore, because he's not sure he'd ever stop having nightmares otherwise.

Then he's skidding to a halt next to ~~Five's body~~ next to Five, and he tumbles down in a tangle of ghostly limbs. Klaus all but throws open the kit, and rummages through it with one hand while taking Five's pulse with the other.

Five's heartbeat is weak, but steady, which is the only bright spot of light in this whole situation. Klaus pulls out bandages, gauze, antibiotics, goddamned *sterile equipment*, and he can't help the massive sigh of relief that wracks through him.

"Okay," Klaus says, looking at Five. Bloody and broken, yeah, but *alive*, and staying that way if Klaus has absolutely anything to say about it. "Okay."

Then he gets to work.

Three years ago, Five got sick.

Really sick. Like, puking-up-his-guts-at-every-opportunity, delirious-for-days, dangerously-dehydrated-because-he-can't-keep-down-water sick. Probably-going-to-die sick.

Mercifully, Klaus had just passed the threshold for staying permanently corporeal a few months before, and was capable of providing twenty-four hour care. It's probably the only thing that saved Five, and even then there was definitely a huge streak of luck involved. Klaus....might have downplayed just how close his little brother came to dying, when he asked later. He doesn't like to think about it.

They still don't know what caused it. Five's best guess is tainted food, and that's probably all they're going to ever get.

After that, Klaus buckled down and studied all the medical textbooks he could get his hands on. He accepted that he's responsible for Five a long time ago, roughly a few days after he manifested the second time, but it never hit him before that if Five ever gets badly hurt, he's completely dependent on Klaus. And, by extension, Klaus' medical knowledge and skills.

The thought is probably the most terrifying thing Klaus has ever experienced. More than that time in the drug lord's trunk, more than that time after Vanya's book, more than that time he woke up to see his own body. And, well. Usually he would run away from things a tenth as scary as that, like he's always done before, and the method has never failed him, but.

It's Five. It's his little brother, all alone, and Klaus promised.

So Klaus has been tearing through all kinds of hospitals and universities and clinics for the past three years, and he's built up a truly impressive array of medical textbooks and diagrams and shit in the bunker's infirmary. He usually studies for a couple hours every night - sometimes more if he feels patient or determined, sometimes less if he really just can't stand looking at the material without the overpowering urge to set it on fire.

It's fine. He gathers multiple copies for just that reason.

Klaus can't actually assess his own skill level without anyone to compare against, but he thinks he's coming along okay. And hey, Five says they'll be stuck here for roughly another decade or so. Klaus is pretty sure he'll be able to amass at least enough knowledge to rival a regular doctor in that time.

The thought of *him* having a *doctorate* is enough to send him into paroxysms of laughter every time he thinks of it. At least a third of his drive to learn is fueled by the curiosity of seeing if he'll spontaneously self-immolate at the sheer absurdity once it happens. He can't imagine what the others will think - his past self is probably going to die laughing. Oh well, Klaus could use some company.

But back on topic. The point is, Klaus is pretty good at first-aid by now. He's never had to tend to wounds this severe before, but he knows the theory, knows what to do, knows enough that Five has a decent chance as long as nothing gets infected. Which is more likely than not, considering he's been lying on some really fucking filthy ground for the last several hours or so, but one thing at a time.

The hardest part, Klaus finds, is dissociating enough from seeing the person he's working on as his little brother. There are several points where Five groans and Klaus' hands stutter to a stop, or he looks at Five's face and finds himself fighting the urge to cry all over again.

Despite all of that, though, he eventually finishes bandaging everything that needs bandaging, making sure all parts are as stable as he can make them (setting Five's leg was the hardest part, Five briefly woke up screaming before passing out again), and giving as many antibiotics as is safe. Now it's all up to Five.

Klaus hovers, checking and rechecking his work. He makes tiny adjustments and scans for anything he missed and maybe has a panic attack or two, but by the time the sun comes up he has to admit there's nothing else he can do.

Well, except for the obvious. Klaus runs his hands through his hair and looks in the direction of the library.

How the fuck is he going to get Five back there? The best bet would be the larger wagon, probably, but there's a reason they don't take that one out too often. The street they're on just had a building collapse on it, there is precisely zero room to maneuver a vehicle large enough to carry an unconscious eighteen-year-old. And Klaus might be able to carry him (all it takes to give himself superstrength is more energy - it's draining but very cool, suck it Luther), but he's not at all certain that Five is anywhere near stable enough for that.

"Fuck," Klaus says, looking helplessly at Five. *"Fuck."*

They could....wait here? Until Five is stable enough to be moved? Klaus is leery about this plan, considering the unsanitary nature of their surroundings, but he can't think of anything else.

Klaus decides, uneasily, to wait until Five wakes up again, and then ask him. Klaus might be better at medical stuff, but Five will always have the bigger brain. Klaus is just the brawn, which isn't a role he ever expected to occupy, but hey, the apocalypse flipped everything all topsy-turvy, why not this.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair again, Klaus sits next to Five and rests a few fingers on his left arm, to keep track of his pulse. It's not as strong as he'd like, but it's stronger than it was before, and reassuringly steady.

Aside from a few cuts and scrapes, Five's left arm is the one limb that survived the collapse unscathed. Klaus finds himself very grateful that Five is left-handed, because he's not sure his right arm is going to be able to heal all the way. His right leg is broken in at least two different places, and his left leg might not be broken but there's a nasty gash that runs from his knee halfway down his shin, and the ankle is puffy and swollen.

There are two cuts on the right side of Five's torso that will leave nasty scars, and Klaus is pretty sure he has a cracked rib or two. All the rest of the cuts aren't too worrying as long as they don't get infected, and of course there's barely a single square inch of him that isn't covered in bruises. However, as long as the bump on his head isn't serious (and Klaus *knows* head wounds bleed a lot, and Five was pretty coherent before, so he's crossing every fucking finger he has there), Klaus is reasonably certain that he's attended to everything as best he can.

It doesn't feel like enough, but of course Klaus has never been enough. He just prays that this time will be the exception.

"Hey, buddy," Klaus says, ignoring how his voice wavers. He reaches out his free hand and cards it through Five's hair. He cut it a few days ago, under threat of re-death from Five if he

tried to make it a mohawk like he wanted. Five wanted to look his best for his and Delores' one-year anniversary next week.

Klaus needs a few more moments for his tongue to unstick from the roof of his mouth. "You mind waking up?" he asks, and hey, he isn't stuttering. Progress. "I could use some help from that big brain of yours."

Five remains unconscious. He always was annoyingly contrary like that.

"Okay then," Klaus says. "I can wait."

So he does.

Chapter 5

Waking up is significantly less pleasant, this time around.

It takes Five some time to remember what exactly is going on. His entire body feels like it just got put through a full course of washer-dryer spin cycle, his brain feels like it's been replaced with scrambled eggs, and now he knows exactly what it feels like to break every bone he has.

Memories bubble up, ones of playing Ghost Tag, and....a creaking noise? Did something happen?

Even hazier memories present themselves. Klaus talking to him. The thick smell of blood. Something about a flare?

Something is *definitely* wrong. Five struggles to open his eyes.

"Five?"

Five's brief burst of triumph at opening his eyes is short-lived. Everything is blurry and blended together, and far too bright. He squints and grimaces, but the light insists on stabbing into his brain. That's bad, his brain is his most important part.

"Oh - here," And then there's shade, which allows Five's eyes to adjust.

Klaus is looking down at him. His brother smiles, and there's definitely real emotion behind it, but it's strained and worn. "Hey, there. Do you remember anything? One blink for yes, two for no."

Five squints at him, and blinks once. Then twice.

Klaus frowns. "Uh."

Five raises an eyebrow. Even through the haze of confusion and pain, he's fairly certain he made his point clear.

"Well," Klaus says, after a moment. "Overview: you got yourself hit with a building. You're in pretty bad shape, although I think you escaped head trauma. I think you'll live, but that's kind of dependent on getting you back to the infirmary. I have a fuckload of medical supplies here, but it's not exactly a sterile environment. Any suggestions about getting you home would be *much* appreciated."

Five frowns, and tries to think. Why can't Klaus just - wait, he's probably not stable enough to be carried. The next most obvious method would be the wagon, and it takes longer than Five would like to admit for him to figure out that probably wouldn't work either.

They *have* experimented with alternate methods of transportation Klaus might be able to do, on and off for the last several years. The results have been disappointing. There is no *logical reason* for Klaus to have to traverse physical space the same as other people, but that's what it looks like. Oh, he can walk on and through all kinds of matter (it took *weeks* for Klaus to stop comparing himself to Jesus after he walked on water, and it didn't help that Five gave him more ammo by accidentally reminding him of the circumstances of their birth, plus the whole 'dead but not' thing), but he can't teleport like Five.

There *was* actually one incident where Klaus managed to materialize from one point to another, but Five doesn't like thinking about that. He got frustrated and made Klaus try *forcing* it, and after a few false starts, it happened. Klaus disappeared, and reappeared a few miles away.

A week later.

Five nearly went insane in the interim trying to figure out what happened (Klaus tried really hard to get the bloodstains out of the walls, and he *mostly* succeeded), but he never really managed. Klaus has no memory of the time he was gone, and has even less of an idea than Five. Once he came back, Five spent an entire day clinging to him and crying incoherently, remained mostly nonfunctional for about two weeks, and refused to let Klaus out of his sight for the next three months.

They stopped trying to experiment, after that.

So trying to branch out into faster ghostly travel methods *now* would be....completely idiotic, to say the least. Five discards that option with extreme prejudice.

However, that leaves him with nothing. Five tries to cudgel his brain into devising an alternate method of travel, but he can't. The single other *remote possibility* is Five jumping himself home, and Five is pretty sure he'd promptly pass the fuck out if he even attempted to summon the energy required to do that.

Well. If nothing is a good option, then it's time to look at what the least-bad option is. For some wild reason, Five is pretty used to this method.

Klaus is still waiting anxiously. Five is honestly not sure if he's *ever* been this patient and quiet before. It's more than a little unnerving.

"Bring th' wagon close 's you c'n," Five says, and fuck, he's going to have to get better at speaking, or learn to blink in Morse code, or *something* because he refuses to tolerate these conditions. "Carry me t' it."

Klaus bites his lip. He looks to be on the verge of saying something, but visibly rethinks it. "...Okay, yeah. I can do that."

Except he doesn't move. It takes Five frowning at him and raising an eyebrow (he's gotten good at that by now, Klaus let slip that Ben had a *Look* that was terrifyingly convincing, and Five's isn't as powerful but he'll get there one day) for him to jolt in realization. "Oh, you mean *now*. Uh, okay."

Klaus looks him over again, and Five rolls his eyes so hard that *they* briefly hurt as well. “‘ll be fine,” he grunts out.

“Right,” Klaus grins lopsidedly, except it only fits the definition of ‘grin’ in a technical sense. “I knew that. Obviously. I’m the one who patched you up, of course you’ll be fine.”

Five knows that Klaus is scared. He really does. It’s a terrifying situation all around, and Five fully expects a breakdown out of himself once everything critical is taken care of. But as the actual injured party in quite a lot of pain here, he’s kind of completely dependent on Klaus’ ability to stay calm and rational, and isn’t feeling very charitable towards any delays. Which is why he glares at Klaus and grits out “Then *go*,” in a tone that conveys the expectation of instant obedience.

Klaus starts a little and goes wide-eyed. A faint glimmer of humor sneaks onto his face, and he salutes. “Alright, Daddy!”

Before Five can shoot back a rejoinder, Klaus vanishes and, presumably, starts heading back to the base. Five won’t admit that he relaxes when he sees Klaus recover some of his annoying personal habits like making ‘funny’ comments. It lets him believe that things *are* going to be okay, that he really will get better.

How Five manages to stay conscious until Klaus comes back, he’s not sure.

Honestly, Five is fairly certain he blacks out once or twice. But it’s entirely probable he has a concussion, so he has to stay awake as best he can. Five agrees with the general theory, but it’s a bit difficult to do in practice. Not to mention that the sun is still glaring down at him, intent on driving spikes through his eyeballs at every opportunity. Five was pretty happy when the sun finally came back a couple years ago, but now he is significantly less enthused.

Five passes the time by trying to take stock of the state of his body. He’s fairly certain he doesn’t have spinal injuries, so that’s a silver lining. It hurts to move around too much, but that’s more due to the grievous injuries he’s suffered *elsewhere*. Not ideal, but not intractable either. Klaus’ bastardized knowledge of medical care probably tops out a little bit before fixing a broken spine.

What isn’t ideal is that Five seems to have accumulated serious wounds on three of his four limbs. He can’t even bring himself to feel pleased that he can still write, not when he’s essentially become an invalid otherwise. He doesn’t even know which, if any, of his limbs will be able to heal back to full mobility. It makes him want to cry with frustration, and he only holds it back through sheer force of will.

If Five really is crippled so badly he can’t function....

Five knows that Klaus will take care of him. He knows it like he knows the first hundred numbers of pi - instinctively, with immediate certainty. If Five can’t walk or scavenge or move around the base, Klaus will do it for him. Five’s quality of life will not suffer. Honestly,

Klaus probably wouldn't even treat it as a big deal, which Five finds himself grateful to realize.

But it *would* be a big deal. Five - Five has never been *restrained* in his mobility, aside from Reginald's 'special training'. He's always been able to go exactly where he wants to go whenever he set his mind to it (with one glaring exception, but he'll get back *someday*). It's the only kind of freedom he knows, the only kind he's ever been able to have, and he's always taken it for granted. To *lose* that is a concept so frightening his breath comes out short, and he squeezes his eyes shut to calm himself.

It's a long, long time before Klaus returns. When he does, he doesn't say anything about the dried tear tracks on Five's face.

Chapter 6

The next few days are *slightly* fraught.

Klaus, of all people, knows that Five can be moody and snappish and obsessive. Coming up on six years in his brother's company has taught Klaus to plumb wells of patience that he didn't even know he had. That memorable time Five wouldn't let Klaus out of his sight for three months comes to mind, and even if Klaus doesn't blame Five in the least dear *god* is he hoping that doesn't ever happen again.

But now Klaus finds himself looking back on those three months chained to his brother with *nostalgia*, because he sure as hell didn't like it but at least it was simpler than *this*.

Five swings between moods with wild abandon. One moment, he's barely paying attention to his limitations and focusing on the physics textbooks Klaus carts over to the infirmary, and occasionally cracks a smile at something Delores says. Two minutes later and he's swearing at the top of his lungs and snapping at Klaus and Delores to *get the fuck out already*. It's fifty-fifty whether he accepts painkillers, and Klaus has given serious thought to drugging him unconscious to change his bandages because *fuck* if he isn't a squirmy little shit. Then there's his 'zen' moments, where he seems to almost come close to accepting his new reality, only to back out at the last moment and spiral all over again.

The main problem, Klaus figures, is that Five is scared, but won't admit it. The reason is fairly obvious. Five's wounds aren't showing any sign of infection yet, but they're still....well, pretty serious wounds. His legs might recover okay, but his arm is....not great. It's been pulped and broken so badly Klaus isn't sure it would be okay even if it *didn't* spend hours in a tourniquet.

Klaus isn't sure whether Five will be able to keep it. He hasn't told Five, but his brother is smart. He can see the writing on the wall.

Klaus isn't sure whether his own presence is helping or not. He's drawing *heavily* on that well of patience, but that doesn't mean he's a *saint*. He snarks back at Five at every opportunity, gets drawn into arguments that escalate into screaming matches, complains to Delores until she gets sick of him, sneaks out at night to break things, rereads medical textbooks until the lines shift and blur together, 'accidentally' jostles Five's broken leg once or twice, and contemplates fratricide probably more than is healthy.

Somehow, they survive the week.

"Happy birthday to us," Klaus drones, sprawled in the infirmary chair. He stares up at the dingy cement ceiling. He'd be more enthusiastic, but he's not feeling up to it after an entire night spent combing the city for more antibiotics with nothing to show for it. Well, he came across plenty of expired ones, but the downside of the apocalypse is that it's easiest to scavenge in the first couple years. Klaus isn't even sure the stuff Five is on now is working.

"Yay," Five says flatly.

Delores sighs. *'I realize the situation is not ideal,'* she says, *'but you could be slightly more enthusiastic about surviving another year. It's not like it's a guaranteed thing.'*

Klaus groans and puts a hand over his eyes. "But Delores, I don't *want* to be positive," he whines.

"For the first time in a week, I agree with him," Five says. "Sorry, Delores."

'Then I suppose I'll have to make up for it,' Delores says. *'For example, I'm quite glad you aren't dead, Five. That would put a damper on our anniversary.'*

"Oh," Klaus says. "Right. That. Happy anniversary, you guys. Hugs and kisses, love you both, all of that."

Five is quiet for a while. When Klaus looks at him, he looks uncharacteristically small. Eventually, eyes avoiding Delores, he says quietly, "I wanted to do something special."

'Oh, Five,' Delores says. *'I don't mind. There's always next year.'*

"Yeah," Klaus says, nodding. "Next year you can make it *twice* as gooey and romantic. I'll help!"

Five's eyes flicker over between the two of them, and Klaus (metaphorically) holds his breath.

When Five gives a little smile and says a soft "Yeah," Klaus relaxes. Crisis averted - for now, anyways. It feels like all Klaus is doing nowadays is running from one wildfire to another, beating them back but never able to put them out. He hopes Five can come out the other side okay.

"So," Klaus says, letting his head loll backwards. "Nineteen! Can't really think of any milestones to celebrate, but give me time. And I'm thirty-five, holy shit. You know, I totally thought I'd be dead by now, and it turns out I was right!"

Five gives a soft huff, but doesn't do anything else. Excellent. Klaus can admit that only two-thirds of the reason he makes jokes about his own death is because they're funny. The other third is to help Five process the trauma of finding his entire family dead. It's - well, Klaus has no illusions that he can *erase* that trauma, but hey, if he's already appointed himself Five's caretaker he might as well go all the way. And since the only ways *Klaus* knows how to process trauma are by either repressing it or laughing about it, death jokes it is.

Hey, it works. And whenever he made death jokes around Ben, all he got was Disappointed Look #9, or occasionally #3 with a hint of #12. Compared to him, Five is a *fantastic* audience.

"Well," Five muses, breaking into Klaus' reminiscing, "Nineteen is a prime number. That's a milestone."

Klaus slowly turns his head to stare, deadpan, at Five. Five looks innocently back.

“It really is,” the little shit says solemnly. “I won’t have this kind of excitement for four more years, Klaus. Aren’t you happy for me?”

Klaus flips him off.

“But Klaus,” and now Five is grinning. He always did have a terrible poker face. You can’t hide evil. “You haven’t heard the best part. When I turn thirty-one, you’ll be turning forty-seven. We’ll be *prime-number buddies*.”

He can’t help the full-body twitch he gives at that. As much as he realizes Five’s obsession with math is necessary and useful, Klaus is of the very firm opinion that he takes it too far sometimes. Klaus has had *experiences* with numerals that he would very much like to forget. The fractions - dear *god*, the *fractions*....

‘Now, Five,’ Delores chides. ‘Behave.’

“Thank you, Delores,” Klaus says. “Five, listen to your girlfriend and stop bullying me!”

Five sniffs and looks at Delores. He smiles. “Well, I suppose you’re right” he says magnanimously. “He *does* have thin skin.”

Klaus gasps in betrayal. “Delores!”

‘I’m sorry, Klaus,’ she says. ‘But it’s his birthday **and** our anniversary. I clearly have to side with him.’

Klaus sags in his chair. “Woe unto me,” he bemoans. “I am beset upon all sides by the very ones I cherish and adore. Surely the angels must weepeth for me.”

“‘Weepeth’,” Five mutters. “They’re weeping for *something*, alright.”

Klaus flips him off again.

Five tries to return the gesture, but one wrong movement sets him hissing in pain. Banter forgotten, Klaus jumps to his feet and hurries over. “Leg?” he says, scanning the spot where Five’s hand is grasping the side of his shin. It’s right over the worse of the two breaks on his right leg, and Klaus winces. “Here, let me.”

Klaus removes Five’s hand, and checks over the splint. It’s a good splint, the best fucking quality Klaus could manage, but he’d feel a lot better if there were a trained doctor around to say if he did it right. The most he has to go on is pictures in textbooks, and Mom’s field medicine course from *decades* ago.

Still, he does his best, and keeps an eye out as he gently moves it around and pokes at it. Five stays silent except when he provides monosyllabic answers to Klaus’ questions of ‘does this hurt?’ and ‘is the pain sharp or dull?’.

“Okay,” Klaus sighs, stepping back. “I could give you more painkillers, but I think I know the answer you’ll give to *that*. So I guess just try not to move like that until you’re better.”

“Better?”

And as Klaus looks up sharply at Five, he realizes he’s miscalculated.

“*Better*,” Five scoffs, and there’s a dark glint in his eyes that Klaus was really hoping wouldn’t show up today. “Sure, Klaus. I won’t move until I’m *better*.”

Klaus holds back an exhale. He runs a hand through his hair. “Five -”

“When would that be, do you think?” Five questions. He’s holding a fistful of blanket so tightly his knuckles are white. “Next month? Next year? Next *decade*? Oh, or how about *never*? Never’s always an option. I wondered for a while, you know, if I could harness time travel to return to my pre-injury body, but *that’s* a crapshoot, I’d be ninety before I figured it out. So it looks like I’m *stuck* like this, doesn’t it?”

Klaus leans back against the wall. He closes his eyes. “Five,” he says, without any hope of being listened to. “Can we not do this today?”

“No, I think we *should* do this today! Don’t *say* that, Delores, I’m not going to calm down! It’s been almost a week and I’m not better at all! I’m still stuck on this shitty bed, in this shitty infirmary, wearing these *shitty fucking bandages* that are supposed to help me get *better* but have fuck-all to show for it!”

“You *are* getting better,” Klaus snaps, opening his eyes. “Fuck, Five, compared to how you were when I first found you -”

“*Better* is a relative term, isn’t it?” Five shoots back. “I’m sure there were times when *you* weren’t actively choking on your own vomit and called *that* ‘better’, am I right?”

Klaus stands abruptly and stops interacting with the physical plane. “Fuck you,” he says coldly, almost wishing his brother could hear him. “Fuck you and your shitty fucking coping methods and your fucking trauma *I* have to deal with and - *everything*. **Fuck you, asshole.**”

“I know you’re still here,” Five says, his words mingling with Klaus’. His hand is shaking now, still white-knuckled and tense. “You never leave. You never fucking *leave*. Scared I’m going to die? That I’ll get infected, or my lungs will collapse, or I’ll waste away without you here to wipe my ass? Guess what, I’m *halfway there!*”

They stand there screaming at each other across planes for another ten minutes, until Five breaks down crying and apologizing, and Klaus rematerializes and does the same, and Delores mediates a truce that will probably stick for the next twelve hours or so.

And so another day passes.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ten days after the accident, Five caves.

(‘The accident’. Calling it that is possibly one of the stupidest understatement Five has ever heard. It’s right up there with calling his time-jump ‘poorly planned’, or the apocalypse ‘inhospitable’.)

Five is a being of logic and reason - at least, on his good days. Inconvenient facts don’t just go away if he ignores them. That just makes things incorrect, and someone who is willfully incorrect is *stupid*. Five refuses to be stupid, refuses with every atom of his being. So no matter how much he wants to push the issue aside and never fucking *think* about it, he can’t. He can’t.

“We need to talk about my arm,” Five says to Klaus.

Klaus freezes, which....is fair. Five *knows* he’s been incredibly pissy about his injuries. He constantly wonders where the fuck Klaus pulls out the patience to deal with him. He really does mean to cut it out every time he apologizes, every time he brings up Klaus’ drug use or death or personal habits to use against him in a shitty attempt to bleed himself dry of the swirling maelstrom of emotions that constantly threaten to drown him in a sea of terror and rage. Only for all of it to come crashing back the next time his thoughts snag on the reality of his situation, and he starts the cycle all over again.

By now it’s as familiar as the dull grey of the cement walls surrounding him. They fight, they scream and yell and insult, they forgive, they move on, they repeat the whole thing a couple hours later. Only Klaus always drops out of visibility, so Five has no idea what kind of vitriol is being sent his way. Sometimes that makes him even angrier, most times he’s unspeakably thankful he doesn’t have to hear his brother spewing out a mirror image of the words coming out of his own mouth. There’s guilt, too, that Klaus *is* hearing it. He never brings up any of it after their fights end. Just continues caring for Five like nothing happened.

Five is pretty certain Klaus loves him. It’s the only explanation.

“Your arm?” Klaus repeats warily.

“Yeah,” Five says, and twitches his right shoulder to indicate, just in case Klaus was hoping to avoid the subject longer by pretending to think Five meant his *left* arm.

“...What about it?” Klaus says. He toys with the pill bottle he’s holding.

Five grits his teeth and squares his shoulders. He’s propped up at an incline, and not for the first time he’s thankful for his brother’s foresight and/or obsessive preparations that led him to hunt through the ruins of two separate hospitals to find enough parts to piece together a

genuine hospital bed. It took a long time to figure out where all the parts went, and the instruction booklet he found by chance actually made things so confusing he set it on fire.

But Five is avoiding the subject at hand.

'Rip the band-aid off,' Five tells himself.

"We're going to have to amputate," he says abruptly.

Klaus drops the bottle. It bounces on the cement floor, rolls somewhere under Five's bed.

Klaus is a stark, chalky white. It's a fascinating phenomenon, really, since it's not like he has blood to drain away from his face anymore, but Five forces himself to shelve the metaphysics of ghost biology for the moment. He knows himself well enough that he can recognize his brain trying to distract him from an unpleasant and, frankly, terrifying topic of discussion.

"I really don't think we do," Klaus says at last, voice an octave higher than normal.

"I haven't been able to feel my right arm since the accident," Five says, struggling to keep his voice dispassionate. "I can hardly move it, and never the way I want to. It's definitely not going to heal back to functionality without *intensive* surgery, and I doubt you can learn that before the damage is permanent. Every day that passes increases the likelihood of it getting infected or necrotizing - it's by far the worst of my wounds, and all our medicine is past expiration. If by some miracle I managed to keep it in spite of all that, it will never work like a real arm again, and will only get in the way. The choice is clear. We're going to have to amputate."

"You say *we*, but I somehow don't think you'll be able to contribute much, *mein bruder*," Klaus says, voice still high. "So I think what you're trying to say here is 'Klaus, pretty please would you grab a hacksaw and *cut my arm off*, that's a dear'. And I'm gonna have to go with *no*, buddy."

"You don't have to use a *hacksaw*," Five says, gut churning with nausea.

"That is *so not the point*."

"Well, what do you suggest, then?" Five snaps, grabbing a fistful of blanket to anchor himself. "Just wait and see how long it takes before it starts to rot?"

"That's not guaranteed to happen, Five -"

"It's not guaranteed to *not* happen, either!" Five shoots back. He can feel the barbs rising in his throat, words to taunt and tear at Klaus until they start screaming at each other again, things that will strain their already thin relationship that much further, but he swallows them down. He's been acting like a child for far too long now.

Klaus hugs his own torso and rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet. He shakes his head. "No, Five, no, I won't -"

“Then I’ll *die*,” Five says, and he means to make it sound angry but instead it comes out almost desperate.

“You don’t know that,” Klaus says.

“No. But it’s likely, isn’t it? If I keep this arm, my chances don’t look very good.” Five glances down at the part in question. It’s completely wrapped in bandages, and has an enormous splint running down the entire length of it. Klaus checks it every day, and about a third of their bandage supply goes towards keeping it covered. Five occasionally gets quick flashes of pain from it, but for the most part it might as well be a lump of wood attached to his shoulder. The burns from the flare are nearly as extensive as the lacerations from the rubble, and from the way Klaus avoids answering the question Five knows that quite literally every single bone is broken, probably more than once. “I’ll die, Klaus.”

Klaus looks very, very small for someone who is six feet. “But what if I - if you *still* - and I’m the one -”

He’s shaking. He’s shaking so much. Five can barely hear the words he’s stumbling, tripping over, the words he can’t bring himself to say, can’t bring himself to even think about because then he’d shake apart at the seams. There’s terror in his eyes, in his face, in the set of his jaw and the tightness of his arms and the lines of his entire body. Five has seen it before - as in, Before. Before he ran, before his jump, before the apocalypse. Klaus was always good at hiding it, but sometimes he was *so damn scared* and Five never knew why. It hurt not to know, but he never figured out how to ask. He was always terrified he’d get it wrong and just make things worse, that Klaus would close down and collapse into himself and *stay* scared, forever.

Now, though, Five knows why Klaus is scared. And despite that, it doesn’t really make as much of a difference as he’d always hoped.

In the last ten days, Five has been very *extremely* frustrated with his inability to do much of anything. But now he experiences a new level of helplessness, knowing that he can’t even fucking hug his brother who has always, always done the same for him.

Five blinks to make the world less blurry. It doesn’t really work.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and it’s quite possibly the most sincere apology he’s ever said in his life. It’s also not enough, but then, it never is.

But Klaus nods, jerkily, and gives a ghost of a smile. “Yeah. Me too.”

Five wonders, at times like this, why Klaus always accepts his apologies. Always forgives him. It’s not something Five has much experience in, forgiveness, so he suspects the answer might be beyond his comprehension for the time being.

He’s trying, though. He is.

“When will you be ready to do it?” Five asks, softly.

Klaus lets out a sound that only technically qualifies as a laugh. “Never?” He swipes at his eyes. “But, uh. I can get all the - stuff - in a day or so. The studying will take longer. Maybe a few more days. But - no more than four or five, I think.” He laughs again. “Four or five. Four and Five.”

“That’s right,” he says. “Four and Five.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm surprised none of you figured out the title before.

Yes, you can yell at me now.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I posted chapter five of my little extras folder yesterday, go check it out!

Trigger warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It takes, in fact, five days for Klaus to prepare abso-fucking-lutely everything he can for the - operation. Five days of scouring every single hospital and clinic he can find (he's already picked them clean several times over, but *he will look again*, dammit) for more supplies, five days of collecting and reading and rereading and re-rereading *any* resources he can find that mention amputation, even tangentially. Five days of preparing, and it doesn't feel even close to enough.

He has the - tools. Those are easy enough to get, which feels bizarrely wrong when he says it like that, but it's true. And thanks to his apocalypse-honed paranoia (even if Five outstrips him in that area, it's only by a *little* bit), he does have quite a few resources detailing how to amputate a limb safely. The words 'amputate a limb' feel very strange sitting next to the word 'safely', but it's better than the opposite, so Klaus shuts up and memorizes things.

Klaus quizzes himself hourly, practices on thin air only slightly less often, and even brings home a mannequin and does a test run (far away from Delores, obviously. He doesn't know if they were friends or not. He apologizes to the mannequin, but needs must.)

But there comes a time when Klaus has prepared as much as he's capable of. No matter how much he tries to delay, he can't justify doing it anymore.

Because Five's arm gets infected on the fourth day.

It's small, and barely noticeable through all the wounds that cover Five's arm. But there's a spot at the tail end of the second-largest gash that looks like a tiny red line, and maybe Klaus would be able to ignore it if it was just that, but when he touches it it's just slightly warmer than the surrounding skin, and then it's official. Klaus' stomach shrinks itself down into a tiny cold ball in the middle of his torso, and Five just looks at it with something close to resignation.

"Tomorrow," Klaus says, and he'd almost be proud of the way his voice doesn't shake as if he weren't in the middle of suppressing a panic attack. Later, he shunts himself off the physical plane and sobs for hours.

He's going to cut up his little brother. He's going to *saw off Five's arm*.

Not for the first time, Klaus wishes he was back in the pre-apocalypse world. Sure, it would probably have been *his* arm that needed amputating, sooner or later. If he even survived long enough to die of infection, instead of a myriad of other things. But Klaus stopped caring about himself a long time ago. That would have been fine. A few years of happiness isn't worth *this*.

But the world doesn't magically vanish and return to its former glory, and Klaus stays dead, and Five doesn't suddenly get up and announce he's fine, no need to go through with it. So Klaus sobs himself out, and spends the rest of the night obsessively reading the procedures and contingencies until he can recite them all word-for-word.

The next day, the day of, the red line is larger, and definitely infected. The antibiotics should have stopped it, would have if they were fresh, but, well. It's near the crook of Five's elbow, and Klaus has determined that he's going to have to take off everything below the middle of his upper arm. There won't be much left. Maybe six, seven inches or so.

Klaus shoves more energy into his hands. They stop shaking. It's a useful trick.

"Ready?" he asks Five. Delores is in the common room, because even though Klaus would *love* some moral support during the whole thing he wants to at least make an *attempt* at a sterile environment. The entire room stinks of rubbing alcohol.

Five nods. His face is pale, but composed. If Klaus fucks this up, he's never going to wake up again. He'll die, and never even feel it. But there isn't a flicker of doubt at putting his life in the hands of Klaus Hargreeves, Fuck-Up Extraordinaire.

Klaus wonders how the hell he managed to earn that kind of trust, and when the hell *he* started to buy into it, because instead of dropping everything and running he's picking up the anaesthesia and giving a smile that probably isn't comforting in the least, and saying, "Well, then, let's get this show on the road."

Anaesthesia is a tricky business, and way more complicated than Klaus ever thought it would be. He's been looking at it on and off for the last several years, but he's no expert.

Thankfully, he only has to worry about mixing the right dosage for one single person, ever, so he can focus on getting *that* part perfect and ignore all the rest. Honestly, he's basically more or less a repository of Five-specific information by now, to the point where it would be kind of creepy otherwise.

Klaus places the mask over Five's face and says, "Count backwards from ten."

Five gets halfway through his own name before he's out. Klaus takes a deep breath, and removes the mask. He looks around helplessly, hoping for - something, anything. For the stupid red line to go away, for the sky to open up and shine a ray of healing light down upon them, for Ben to come through the wall and tell him *stop, what are you doing -*

But there's nothing, of course. Just Klaus, his unconscious brother, and an array of tools for cutting off an arm.

Klaus takes another breath. It's a tiny, pointless reminder of when he used to be alive and only had to worry about himself. It's comforting, a little.

Then he picks up the first tool.

Go time.

The actual amputation part is relatively straightforward.

Ignoring the part where it's *his little brother's arm*, cutting it off is not very difficult. The tricky part is making sure Five doesn't bleed out afterwards, and that the risk of infection is minimized, and that there aren't *any* complications waiting to pop up down the road.

Klaus is hyperaware of every movement he makes, every twitch and blink and breath - or, rather, the lack of such. He's never paid much attention to whether or not he does living-person things at any given moment, but right now any error is unacceptable.

Klaus doesn't really think about how *different* he is very often. From living people. Most of the time he just keeps himself visible and corporeal as a default, and interacts with the world in a fairly similar way to Five. He can drop out of the physical plane with a thought, and has a lot of fun setting up jump scares that very occasionally manage to startle Five, but other than that and Ghost Tag, Klaus might as well be alive.

Not now, though.

He pulls from his energy pool and practically lights himself on fire. It makes him *aware* of himself - of his movements and actions and *thoughts* - in a way that's *sort of* comparable to a few drugs he's taken, except more perpendicular than parallel. It makes him feel - powerful. Like he can do anything. He usually only does this to get a boost of strength, but it also improves his precision to inhuman levels. He doesn't make a single movement that he doesn't approve of, and his hands seem to directly follow his thoughts instead of bothering to travel all the way from his brain to his muscles. Which makes sense, since he doesn't have those anymore and only acts like he does out of habit. Klaus couldn't make a mistake right now if he tried.

It's also draining as fuck. Klaus thinks he might just have to rest on the nonphysical plane for a while after this, out of necessity rather than choice. He hasn't had to do that in years.

It's worth it, though. Because however much Klaus wants to throw down the tools, stagger backwards, and curl up in the corner to cry, he doesn't. He continues. When he looks back later he can't quite recall the step-by-step process, the entire thing crystal clear but oddly distant, but he doesn't falter once.

And then

finally

it's done

and he checks everything again

cleans all the tools

checks Five's breathing

twice

three times

stops the energy coursing through him

and collapses on the floor and dry heaves for ten minutes, before hyperventilating so badly he only stops when Five wakes up.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: obliquely-described amputation, infection.

And because I know you've been wondering - this is permanent. Five will not get his arm back. I figure that if his time-travel keeps *additions* to his body (the tracker), it would keep subtractions as well.

Chapter 9

Five *expected* to have some trouble adjusting to the loss of a limb. It's only natural. He knows, abstractly, about phantom limb syndrome and neurological rewiring and shifting balances. As much as he would really like to just adjust instantly, that's not going to happen.

However, in what's proving to be a *very* annoying trend, Five seems to have understood the theory perfectly and simultaneously completely underestimated the reality. He may need to study this tendency of his in more depth, because it's already happened with some *very* important subjects and if he's going to attempt something like time-travel *again* he's going to need to tone down the hubris.

Not something he's particularly good at, but Klaus volunteered to help out, so Five can be assured of getting his pride punctured with even more regularity. Yay.

Missing an arm, even if it's his non-dominant one, is a kind of strangeness Five has no frame of reference for. It was nonfunctional for two weeks before the amputation, but it was still *there*. Now, every time he looks down he gets hit with a split-second of confusion, like he's suddenly gone into freefall. It's not a feeling he's fond of. Nor is the one where he looks at the stump of his arm and gets slammed with an intense sense of *wrongness* so strong it takes his breath away and he freezes for several minutes, breathless.

Klaus, however, uses his probably-psychic powers to divine exactly when Five needs distracting. Five *still* has no idea how he does that. He's tested Klaus several times and he would *swear* that Klaus doesn't have any powers unrelated to being a ghost, but then he goes and says the exact right thing to snap Five out of a downward spiral of negative thinking. It would be fascinating if it weren't so *baffling*.

Five makes an effort to stop antagonizing Klaus. He's not *completely* successful at this, considering the only difference in his condition is that he's now lighter by roughly ten pounds and he can feel the itchy unfamiliarity of the stump. But there are fewer fights - it's actually more accurate to just call them arguments, now, which is a huge step forward - and Five reins in several of his nastier comments. He gets better at meditative breathing, and nearly stabs himself in frustration when he realizes that he's associated meditation with his jumps for so long that it's *actual* purpose completely slipped his mind.

He meditates to get over it. It mostly works.

Thankfully, the stump doesn't get infected. Neither does anything else. Klaus still pumps him full of as many expired antibiotics as he can, and Five takes them with as much grace as he's capable of mustering, because however psychic Klaus is he's not a very good actor. The terror lurking behind his eyes is a constant shadow that gets even larger whenever he looks at where Five's arm used to be. He constantly checks on Five, to the point where Five suspects he's also doing it invisibly after their argument about how he isn't giving Five space to fucking *breathe*. He takes the medical textbooks out and flips through them in every spare moment, mutters quotes under his breath and might possibly have several of them memorized

front to back. He stocks the infirmary with so many supplies he has to branch out into the miscellaneous room to hold it all.

Five thought - well, more like hoped - that after the operation Klaus would recover from that terror. Looking back, Five can admit that he was naive to think so. Klaus and fear have a long and complex relationship, one that Five suspects he doesn't even know the half of. It grates not to fully understand something, but this isn't a string of numbers he can lay out and work through. This is his stupid, annoying, irritating, caring, *complicated* brother. Maybe the biggest question mark the Umbrella Academy has ever produced. If Klaus is scared, Five has very low confidence of fixing that. He remembers Reginald berating Klaus time and time again for his cowardice, the reason he kept denying his powers and stifling his potential.

Five stopped caring about what Reginald said long ago, but he has to admit that Klaus' fears never did make much sense to him. They were rooted so deep he couldn't figure out what they fed on. And it's coming back to bite him now.

"Do you have any suggestions?" Five asks Delores quietly. They're in the infirmary together, half an hour before lights out (Five refuses to call it 'bedtime'). Klaus is definitely out, heading off to pick up supplies - food this time, thankfully. "I don't know what to do. And it's not like I don't have my own problems." He lifts his stump to indicate.

'I'm not sure,' Delores admits. 'I haven't seen him acting like this before. You'd likely be a better expert than me, you grew up together. What did you do when he was scared as a child?'

Five looks away. "Ignored him," he says, with no small amount of shame. "It's - he was always swinging between extremes. Manic and depressed, extroverted and misanthropic, fearless and terrified of his own shadow. We all just learned to tune him out after a while." He looks down at where his fingers are worrying the edge of the blanket. "We were all pretty selfish. Stupid, selfish kids."

'Well,' Delores says after a pause where he can't meet her eyes. 'You aren't a kid anymore. Maybe it's time you stopped ignoring it.'

"Yeah," Five says. "Yeah."

Except he doesn't.

He *wants* to. Dear god, he wants to. Klaus doesn't really get better. He doesn't get *worse*, but Five suspects that is entirely a result of his inability to sleep. If ghosts had any physical needs whatsoever, Five is fairly certain Klaus would have killed himself with neglect by now.

But there's still that siren inside his head, shouting at him to not interfere, not say anything. It will pass. Klaus will be okay. If Five tries to do something, tries to help, there's a very real possibility he'll just make things *worse*, that he'll break Klaus beyond repair. Five doesn't know what to say or what to do to *help*, has never known. All he knows is how to hurt.

Five is so very good at hurting his brother.

So he ignores Delores' disapproving glances and Klaus' unceasing efforts to bury himself in medicine. Ignores the way his chest tightens in a way that has nothing to do with his cracked ribs, and how he feels like he's wasting away in this stupid tiny cement room.

Klaus says it's started snowing. It's early for that, barely into November, but the seasons have been a little fucked up since the apocalypse. Thankfully not unrecognizable, but a bit wilder, a bit more intense.

The weather means nothing to Klaus, of course, but it means Five can't go outside until spring. Not that he expected anything different, but it's still depressing to hear. On the bright side, though, Klaus thinks that Five can move back into his room in a couple days. Klaus is clearly reluctant to remove Five from the infirmary and it's instant access to medical supplies, but Five pushes for it and he admits that there is no practical reason for him to stay. Not when his room is literally thirty feet away.

Five hopes that seeing him in his room instead of a hospital bed will help to reassure Klaus. It's the only way to help that he can think of that won't *definitely* make things worse. He just has to display clear signs of getting better, which isn't hard when there's the prospect of getting out of the infirmary on the table. He even finds himself laughing once or twice, and engages in a few debates with Delores about the nature of the space-time continuum. God, he's missed that.

Nearly six weeks after the accident, four after losing his arm, Five moves back into his room.

It's like he can fucking *breathe* again. He didn't realize just how suffocated he felt lying in the infirmary, staring at cement the whole day. He had his books and Delores and a few chalkboards, and sometimes Klaus, but as much as they helped there was no disguising that he was *stuck* there.

Here he can run his fingers over his familiar bed (highest quality mattress and sheets they could find, of course), inspect the wall of maps across from his bed (heavily annotated from their yearly summer trips), turn his head slightly to catch a glimpse of the bookshelf in the corner (Vanya's book has the place of honor, but the rest are all dozens of ridiculously soft sci-fi novels that are a shameful weakness of his), stare up at the ceiling that he and Klaus spent two days painting with a celestially-accurate map of the stars in glow paint (Klaus wanted to just splatter it everywhere, but Five told him in no uncertain terms how unacceptable that was, and drew out all the positions himself).

Five smiles, and for some reason he can't seem to stop.

He thinks this is probably what 'healing' feels like.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

TW: a bunch of inferences about Klaus' past.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Klaus has fucked up.

It's almost relieving, in a way. He's been expecting it for weeks now. He's surprised it didn't happen earlier. It's an immovable part of reality, a constant that Klaus has set his life by. It's so integral to the universe that it's continued even once he *died*. Number Four Hargreeves, Constant Failure, has struck again.

It's a snowstorm. A really fuck-off big one, a blizzard of Biblical proportions. Are there blizzards in the Bible? Because if there aren't, Klaus is pretty sure this one is trying out for the part.

Klaus knows this kind of storm. He's weathered several, both alive and dead. He had a system for surviving the weather, back when he was alive. Plan A was finding someone with a place and sleeping with them for a few nights. Ben was nice enough, when things outside got too bad, to stalk his prospective roommates to see if they put roofies in his drink or had a torture dungeon in the basement or something. He always took it hard those few times they got tired of Klaus' flamboyance and started smacking him around.

Second fallback was to get a bed in a homeless shelter. He was almost guaranteed to be on drugs, but it was halfway expected for the people there to be some form of high, so he just had to be unobtrusive about it. Not a state of being that comes naturally to Klaus, but he did his best. And however much of a ruckus he made, shelters were usually run by people unwilling to throw a homeless junkie back out on the streets in the middle of a blizzard.

But sometimes shelters were full, or too far away. The next option was checking into rehab. This was the option Klaus liked least, because then he had to be *careful*. Bad weather was rarely courteous enough to announce itself in advance (at least, not to a guy who had no access to television or newspaper forecasts), so it often came by when Klaus didn't have much of a stash built up. He had to ration out whatever he had *very* carefully to get through rehab with his mind intact. He hated that.

Except Ben flatly vetoed finding a nice dry place outdoors where he probably wouldn't even freeze to death. Nag, nag, nag, that one. The one time Klaus tried that instead of going to the rehab place a few blocks over, Ben shouted at him until he had a mausoleum flashback and *ran* all the way there. He didn't speak to Ben the entire time he was there, and Ben didn't look so proud of himself either, but Klaus never protested the rehab option again.

It's *so much easier* when he's dead - all he has to do is stay inside the bunker. Having a stable, fortified place to stay is incredible. Five doesn't really appreciate it on a conscious level, but Klaus can do it enough for the both of them. He's completely certain that the Academy didn't count as an actual home in any sense of the word, so this is Klaus' first home *ever*. It's amazing, really, how thrilling that one little word is. He's never been able to say it with a straight face before.

And being dead is, ironically, possibly the best thing to ever happen in Klaus' life. He doesn't have to starve or feel pain or wonder, when he falls down, if he'll be able to get up again. Going out in the middle of a snowstorm is completely *safe* and wouldn't make Ben yell at him at all. The only thing he has to worry about is keeping track of where he is, and know how to get back home.

He shouldn't be so surprised that he failed at that. He shouldn't, but he is.

Because he *knows* these streets. Klaus has walked them his whole life *and* death. He knows the buildings, the alleys, the bridges, the houses. He knows the parks and the subways and the roads and the stores. He knows this city, this city he was brought to as a baby and grew up in and died in and never once lived in. It's all he's ever known.

Except the storm is screaming around him, slamming against the few walls still brave enough to be standing, the ground is completely coated in snow, and Klaus can't see two feet in front of his face. He lost track of where he was two streets ago - or maybe five. Distance is meaningless right now. No matter how hard Klaus squints at his surroundings or digs through the rubble in the hopes of finding *something* identifiable, he remains completely ignorant of where the *fuck* he is.

"Please," Klaus begs, but the wind snatches the words away. "Please, I have to get back. It's almost dinnertime. I have to get back."

Five can hobble for short distances, but it's painful. He's been eating erratically, despite Klaus' best efforts, and barely touched breakfast and lunch. He doesn't know about the storm. Klaus *promised* he'd be back before dark.

That really should have tipped him off. He's *terrible* at keeping promises.

Klaus wanders further. For all he knows, he could be heading in the exact opposite direction from the library. With his luck, he probably is. Klaus ponders the idea of turning around, but he just *knows* that *then* he'd *definitely* be heading in the wrong direction. *C'est la mort*.

Klaus tugs on his hair. The snow whips through him, the wind unable to tell he's there. Being corporeal just gets him knocked down. It doesn't help his eyesight any, even when he tries sending energy there in the hopes it'll do something. Apparently he *can't* solve every problem that way.

Swallowing, Klaus looks up. He can't see anything, of course, but he imagines that the sky is looking back and smiling that kind of stupidly *smug* grin Klaus saw sometimes on his dealers when they wanted 'alternative payment'. He never really minded so long as he got his fix, but

Ben used to glare at them so heavily he was kind of surprised the Horror didn't come out to play. For the first time, Klaus understands the feeling.

The view grows even blurrier, which Klaus didn't know was even possible, and he panics for a second before realizing it's because he's crying. He's lost somewhere in the city, in the middle of a snowstorm that doesn't seem to be ending anytime soon, and now he's crying. Sounds about right.

He shouldn't have come out. He knew - he *knew* it was unnecessary. Five even sniped at him about it, a little. He's been toning it down lately, but Klaus knows that Five thinks his preparations are verging on the ridiculous. Which is saying a lot, coming from Number 'have as many backup plans as you can think of then multiply them by' Five. It's just that Klaus was reading about cancer and that stuff is fucking *terrifying* and he finally figured out that one doctor's office belonged to an oncologist and -

He still shouldn't have come out. He left the books behind, they were just slowing him down. And it doesn't matter now, because there's the very real possibility that this storm will go on for *days*. The very thought leaves Klaus breathless, cold in a way that has nothing to do with the ever-constant chill of death he's grown used to.

Klaus sits down in the middle of the - wherever he is. He's fairly sure he's on a street, but he could also be in a...park? Vacant lot? Alleyway? He'd like to say he's not occupying the same place as a chunk of rubble, but there's so much snow going through him he could be sitting in the middle of a wall and probably wouldn't notice.

Klaus stares into the snow. It's almost mesmerizing, in a way. He remembers staring out the windows of rehab, shelters, and random hookups. Sometimes Ben would stand beside him, and it was a moment where they weren't sniping at each other and could just be brothers. Klaus has had a few moments like that with Five over the past several years. Not as many lately, though.

The wind screams at him, and redoubles its effort to scour the Earth of all life. It seems to have missed the memo that it's a bit late. The cold is bone-deep, soul-deep, flays him apart even though he can't actually feel it at all.

He fucked up. Klaus can't believe it took this long.

He scrubs a hand over his face. It doesn't stop the tears. He doesn't bother trying any harder.

Klaus gets up, and keeps walking.

The blizzard lasts three days.

.....I am very sorry.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Five lights another candle. The light is thrown against the walls and illuminates the room. He leans back against the shelf and looks through lidded eyes.

It was a fucking *bitch* to set himself up in the supply room, but he managed it.

Eventually.

After a *day and a half*.

Five breathes through his nose. He couldn't reach the painkillers (which was fun to discover), but getting a little drunk works almost as well. Almost.

At least he has plenty of food. And he still has about half a bottle of wine, so that's....good. That's good. He thinks he'd trade about half of the food around him for another bottle, but crippled invalids shouldn't be whiners. He should look on the bright side.

He tries to think of what that could be. He fails.

Well....there could be a leak? That would be *bad*. He thinks.

Five might be more than a *little* drunk.

He takes another swig.

The candle burns. Five actually can't quite remember why he lit it, but it's probably important.

And then Klaus materializes in front of him, wild-eyed and wide-eyed, kneeling and holding out his hands like he's trying to travel back in time. Five knows what the attempt looks like.

Five raises an eyebrow.

"Oh, look," Five says. "You're back."

"Five," Klaus says. He looks terrible. Like he's been through hell.

Five is a bit familiar with the feeling.

“So,” Five says. “Care to explain?”

“Five,” Klaus says. He’s crying. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Not hearing an explanation here,” Five says. He takes another swallow of wine.

“There was a storm,” Klaus says. He’s crying harder now. “I got lost. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Oh, I saw the storm,” Five smiles at him. “Hobbled over to the door. And then to the infirmary, where I slipped trying to reach the painkillers, and then I had to drag myself to the wine cellar after that, and then *here*. Been here for the past day or so. Not sure *exactly* how long. Delores?”

‘*Around there,*’ Delores says tiredly. She’s leaned up against him, wrapped in an afghan Klaus repaired after finding it in the ruins of an apartment somewhere. She’s been a godsend in keeping Five from freaking out too much. So instead he mostly just got angry.

He kind of prefers it to being freaked out. It feels *marginally* better. Why doesn’t he always do this? It keeps the blood flowing, and Five is pretty sure that’s a good thing. As long as all the blood stays on the inside. He may not be studying to be *that* kind of doctor, but he knows that much.

“Yeah,” Five turns back to Klaus. The room spins and he blinks a bit to clear it up. He tries to prop himself up but forgets that his only hand is holding the wine bottle, and slips further down instead.

Klaus reaches out to steady him. “Five -”

“*Don’t,*” Five snaps.

His brother freezes.

“*I,*” Five says, making sure to enunciate each word carefully. “Am *not happy* with you right now. In fact, I’m *pretty fucking pissed*. Do you understand?”

Klaus gives him a tiny nod. Otherwise, he’s still frozen.

“Okay,” Five says, and delicately sets the wine bottle down. “So here is what you are going to do. You are going to get me back to my room. You are going to put me in my goddamned *bed*. You are going to get me *drugs*. You are going to make sure that I am comfortable. You are going to leave Delores with me. And then you are going to *get the fuck out of my face until I fucking call for you*, at which point you will *come fucking running*. Is that clear?”

Klaus nods, rapidly. “Five, I -”

“Also, you will not speak,” Five interrupts.

“O-” Klaus cuts himself off and nods again instead. He’s still crying.

Five doesn't ever remember Klaus crying when they were kids. That doesn't mean he *didn't*, of course. They were kids, they all cried. *Five* cried, even though no one knows about it. He suspects Klaus cried a lot, because he was always the most emotional out of all of them, but they always tried to avoid giving each other too much ammunition.

The only time Five remembers them crying in front of each other is when they got their tattoos, and that time Luther misjudged a throw and broke Ben's arm when they were seven. They all ended up bawling, because Ben was hurt and Luther was freaking out and those were two things that should *never* happen. Then they all stopped at once when Reginald came in and chastised them for acting like children. At seven.

God, they were so fucked up.

Klaus is very careful as he carries Five back to his room, although he can't help a slight bit of jostling. Far less than Five expected. He notices the telltale blue glow coming off of Klaus' skin, and figures out (after a few second's confusion, which he puts down to the wine) that Klaus is probably channeling that perfect precision thing he can do. Good for surgery *and* carrying patients afterwards. Hooray.

Five is returned to his bed, which he missed far more than he expected. He revises his plans for when they (eventually) move to another city. He's not quite sure *how* they're going to transport the bed, but like fuck is he leaving *this* behind.

"Oh," Five breathes out, as he just lies on his (soft, dear god in heaven how did they make it this *soft*) mattress. He can feel the pain in his legs (and back, and neck, and shoulders) lessening already. Placebo effect, probably, but he doesn't even *care*. "Okay. Oh, god."

Klaus hesitates, and goes to get painkillers.

Five deliberately relaxes his muscles, something he hasn't done for the past two and a half days. This may have been a mistake, since doing so unleashes a new wave of pain that blots out his vision. Five's breath stutters, and he has to force himself to keep breathing. He might possibly black out for a second or two.

But, eventually, the wave ebbs away, and - oh, wow, Five almost forgot what it felt like to *not be in pain*. It's *amazing*, why doesn't he do this all the time? He's never getting out of bed again.

Five closes his eyes and luxuriates in being warm and safe and *not* in constant pain. He's learned to appreciate the little things, these past few days.

Klaus comes back, and lingers in the doorway. He places Delores on a shelf, carefully.

"Five?" Five's eyes snap to Klaus, who freezes again but keeps talking regardless. "I need to know how much you've been drinking. Painkillers and alcohol mix badly."

Five stares at him. "About two and a half bottles over the past day," he says at last.

Klaus - doesn't really *flinch*, so much as collapse into himself. "Oh."

“Give,” Five says, holding out his hand. He can only hold it up for a moment, and it flops down against his chest. He frowns at it.

Klaus takes a step into the room, before he stops. He swallows. “No,” he says. “It’s dangerous, Five. I’ll give you the painkillers once you sober up.”

Five takes a *very* deep breath.

“Ah,” he says. He feels very - distant. Kind of floaty. “I see. So *that’s* what you were doing. You spent those three days researching drug and alcohol interactions. I didn’t know you could consume things again, Klaus.”

Klaus doesn’t respond.

“You know,” Five says, and rolls his head back to stare up at the ceiling. “I was actually scared? Not for me, for you. When you didn’t come back, I thought something terrible must have happened. Didn’t know *what*, but I came up with a few scenarios. Perks of being a genius, you can think of *anything*.”

Silence.

“But, of course, that wasn’t the case.” Five grins up at the stars. Well. More like bares his teeth. “Joke’s on me, yeah?”

There’s the sound of an inhale, and Five can *almost* hear the words Klaus is going to say.

“Don’t,” Five says. He wants it to come out angry, but all of a sudden the only thing he can feel is exhaustion. He closes his eyes. “Just - don’t. I should’ve expected this, really. I guess it took some time to sink in. Vanya did warn me.”

There isn’t a single whisper of sound. Five wonders if Klaus went inaudible.

“Just leave,” Five mutters.

When he opens his eyes, Klaus is gone.

Chapter End Notes

TW: heavy drinking, trying to mix drugs and alcohol.

I am still quite sorry, guys. And...the rest of the week isn't going to be much better.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings at the end.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Five sleeps for most of the next week or so. Klaus gives him painkillers once he sobers up, and he's conked out from then on. In between sleeping like a log, Five is ecstatic when he can finally move without pain. The look on his face is a pretty familiar one, because Klaus has seen it the few times he's shot up near a mirror.

(He tries to ignore that comparison.)

Five declines to talk to him more than is absolutely necessary. Delores engages a bit more, but still gives him the cold shoulder. Klaus isn't a very popular guy around the house nowadays. Which is very understandable. Klaus isn't such a fan of Klaus either at the moment.

The damage to Five's injuries could be worse, but they're still pretty fucked up. The breaks (especially on his leg) will probably be set back by several weeks, and his ankle has to be wrapped up again. Klaus restitches one of the cuts on his torso that opened up again, and Five's wrist is sprained from dragging himself around while trying not to aggravate anything *and* carry three wine bottles (plus Delores).

Five reported breathing problems during the trek, which is almost certainly due to his ribs. Thankfully, they don't seem to have gotten any worse, so. Small mercies.

(Ben used to say that, when he got drugs that weren't cut with cleaning supplies or other shit that might kill him. Hey, it's not like he could ever afford the *really* good stuff.)

With a bit of luck, Five should heal up just a month or two past where they estimated before. Klaus checks on things every day, a limit set by Five and agreed upon by Delores. Klaus follows it without protest.

He is also not allowed to go outside until they are close to running out of food. He agrees to that one as well.

Klaus busies himself with various chores around the base. There's still plenty to do. He cleans up the mess Five made while he was pulling himself along the halls. He rearranges the supplies and puts things back in their place. He reorganizes nearly every room besides Five's room and the common room. He sits outside Five's door and stares at the wall and tries not to figure out something that would make him cease to exist.

(Ben wouldn't like that. The few times he - Ben always talked him out of it. And he hated making Ben look like that, so he never *really* tried. He's not so sure what the rules are now that he actually *is* dead, but he has a feeling Ben still wouldn't like it. And there wouldn't be anyone to help Five.)

Five becomes more cognizant, and slowly improves healthwise. He's pretty happy when he can finally write equations without pain, even if they're blocky and slow from the wrist splint. It does wonders for his general amiability. Ten days after the storm, he deliberately initiates a conversation with Klaus that lasts nearly six minutes.

Delores spends almost all of her time with Five, which is fine. He hears them laughing once or twice, which is good. It's really good. It also means that the common room is open, so Klaus spends most of his time there now. It's quiet enough that he can hear if Five calls for him.

(It's so quiet. Quiet like he never knew when he was alive. He wanted this for so long, and now he can't quite remember why.)

Gradually, Five becomes less cool towards Klaus. He's not forgiven, because it's not really something that *can* be forgiven, but as Five improves so do his feelings towards Klaus. Delores starts talking to him again sometimes.

Klaus tries his best to stay out of the way. He's not sure what Five is working on - probably some aspect of time travel, but no matter how much Five tried to explain, Klaus never managed to grasp more than the really basic basics. Delores is much better than him at understanding temporal things, which is why those two nerds are perfect for each other. Klaus doesn't really bring much to the table, he knows. Sometimes Five chatters to him about equations, and the most Klaus can do is smile and nod along. But Five seems to be having fun, for the first time in a good while, so Klaus keeps himself to the side so he won't interfere.

And then, four weeks after the blizzard, they have an argument.

Klaus has been *trying* to avoid that. He really has. Five has poked at him a few times, but he hasn't responded to the bait. He knows Five is confused about that, but he doesn't really see why. It's not like things are the same, when things were fixable after every fight, and the idea of more arguing just makes Klaus' stomach churn.

But this time Five is raring to go, and his sheer persistence wore Klaus down. What's worse is that the topic of contention doesn't even make *sense*. Five starts off by needling Klaus about his uncharacteristic silence lately, and it spiraled from there. Klaus doesn't even know what's going on anymore.

"I'm *talking* about why you're so fucking *different* now!" Five shouts. Delores gave up trying to keep the peace several minutes ago, and now she's simply watching them with an air of resignation.

"What the *fuck* does *that* mean?!" Klaus throws up his hands in exasperation. As much as he absolutely never would, Five's face is looking very punchable right now.

“I *mean* that you’re so quiet I barely even know when you’re around! I’d think you were going out if you didn’t respond every time I asked for you -”

“I *wouldn’t*,” Klaus snaps, because no he fucking wouldn’t, not after what happened, not after that.

“I know, but what the fuck is going *on* with you! You’ve never acted like this before, and it’s freaking me out! Delores agrees!” Five points at Delores.

‘Don’t pull me into this, Five, this is between you two,’ she says.

“Right, leave her out of this,” Klaus says. He feels boxed in, trapped. Five is glaring at him and he doesn’t know what to *do*. He’s not sure he can keep himself from breaking down if Delores joins in.

Five frowns, but lets it go. “Fine,” he says heatedly. “So the problem is with me, then?”

“What?” Klaus says, caught off-guard.

“Don’t bullshit me, Klaus” Five snaps. “You hardly ever look at me, and never in the eyes. You never talk to me and you don’t want to. You check on me once a day and don’t interact with me at all beyond that. I’m not an *idiot*, you obviously have a problem with me, so what the fuck is it? I can’t think of anything I’ve done - I can think of something *you’ve* done, but even you aren’t that much of an asshole to blame me for that - so you’ll have to enlighten me.”

“Wha - I - what?” Klaus says. It’s all he really can say, honestly. “I’m not - *what?*”

“Why are you mad at me?” Five shouts.

“I’m not mad at you!” Klaus shouts back. ***“You’re mad at me!”***

“I -” Five stops. “Um?”

“Remember?” Klaus laughs, even if it doesn’t really sound like one. “When you said you were, quote, ‘fucking pissed’ at me? And I’m *sorry*, okay? I’m so *fucking* sorry! But I can’t fix it! I can’t go back in time and stop myself from going out into that blizzard, and I can’t put your arm back, and I can’t stop that fucking building from falling! I can’t fix it, I can’t make you stop hating me, I can’t do *anything!*”

“Klaus -” Five looks kind of pale, but Klaus keeps going, and he doesn’t think he could stop himself if he tried. He’s not even sure of the words coming out of his mouth right now, weeks of frustration and guilt and terror all pouring out in a torrent.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but I watched you almost die and burnt half your arm to a crisp and then cut it off and then got lost in my own fucking city which almost got you killed and *I am sorry*. I’d give anything to have none of that happen and go back to before any of this shit, but I fucking can’t, okay! I’m sorry, but I *can’t!*”

Klaus is crying. He wipes at his eyes, fairly ineffectively. Five is staring at him, and now he's incredibly pale, but Klaus obviously doesn't even know how to read his brother anymore so he doesn't bother trying. He doesn't even know what he's trying to accomplish, or what he wants, or what Five wants, or what anyone is *doing*.

He just wants it to stop. All of it. He wants something he promised not to want, and Klaus might (definitely) be a shitty brother but he promised Ben, promised Five, and they're the only promises he's never broken. He's not going to now.

He still wants it.

"I'm trying to be better," Klaus says brokenly. "I am. I'm just - I can't."

"Klaus," Five says urgently.

Except he can't handle it anymore, can't hold it back, can't can't *can't*. Klaus drops out of corporeality and *runs*.

Chapter End Notes

TW: implied/referenced suicidal ideation, unreliable narrator, depression.

So. *steeples fingers* Tell me what you think.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Five has fucked up.

It's funny, really. He feels like he should expect this by now. He's incredible with academia and athleticism and apocalyptic survival and nearly any topic he can care to name, so long as that topic isn't 'being a good brother'. That one keeps hitting him by surprise, and he keeps dropping the ball.

It's not like he didn't have all the pieces. Once he looks everything over, it's blindingly obvious. And yet he remained ignorant and oblivious and *stupid*.

Five loves his siblings. Intensely, fiercely, deeply. He visits their graves once a month when he's able and updates them on what he's doing. He hangs onto every word of Vanya's book, every memory Klaus can drudge up. He works every day, until his fingers cramp and his chalk crumbles in his hand, to make some tiny, infinitesimal progress in understanding the truth of every layer of reality so that he can return home, get back to them, *save* them.

They're his world. The only one he's ever known.

The idea of anyone hurting them - well, he doesn't have to imagine it. Reginald always hurt them, and Five always fought back. He pushed himself and distinguished himself and made himself the fucking center of attention (difficult, when he was surrounded by One and Two's eternal competition, Three's effortless command of the spotlight, Four's - everything, and Six's devastating powers) so that they never had to be. He protected them, he always did. If they didn't notice, that was okay. Neither would Reginald.

Just the thought of hurting any of them *himself* is - he can't think about it. He can't, but he forces himself. Five nearly throws up at trying to imagine deliberately, permanently hurting one of his siblings. He imagines setting Ben on fire and gags. He imagines cutting off a *piece* of Vanya and actually *does* have to choke back vomit.

Five wipes his mouth with his sleeve. He stares at his blanket.

"Don't say it," he says to it.

'I wasn't going to,' Delores says. She sounds....sad. Sad and tired.

Five grips the blanket in his hand. "I'm an idiot," he says. The words burn like acid, but they're true. The truest words he's ever said. That's probably why they hurt. "I'm a stubborn, selfish, childish *idiot*."

Delores stays quiet.

“He thinks I hate him,” Five says blankly. “He - he’s scared and traumatized and hates himself and he thinks I hate him too. I -”

Five realizes that he is crying.

“I didn’t realize,” Five says, and he hates how pitifully small his voice sounds. “I didn’t realize. How didn’t I realize that?”

Five doesn’t give himself the comfort of asking *why* Klaus thinks he would hate him. He knows already. It’s not like he made it a secret that he was angry with Klaus for going out into that blizzard. Truth be told, Five is still a little mad about that. But looking back, he remembers that he never told Klaus that he was forgiven. Five just thought he’d have picked it up. That he’d *know*, with that same psychichness he pulls out to calm Five down whenever he gets depressed.

“I should have talked to him,” and here Five closes his eyes so he doesn’t have to look at Delores, the one who suggested that very fucking thing, weeks ago.

Five remembers the reasons for his hesitance. He was worried that he didn’t know why Klaus was doing what he was doing, and he wanted to have all the facts first. He was hoping that it would pass over. That Five wouldn’t have to confront Klaus about anything, because he knows he’s terrible with people in general and his siblings in particular and he was scared he’d fuck up so badly it couldn’t be fixed.

Well. Joke’s on him.

‘Are you going to?’ Delores asks.

Five blinks at her. It takes a few seconds for her to resolve into a visible image, but he wipes at his eyes and says, very eloquently, “What?”

‘You didn’t talk to him before. Are you going to now?’ she says, with an air of infinite patience that is nonetheless being sorely tested. She wears that look often around him and Klaus, but a lot more in the past few months.

“I think it’s a little late for that,” Five says bitterly.

*‘Number Five Hargreeves, the best time to talk to him would have been over a month ago. The second best time is today. The **worst** time would be **never**. Which one are you going to pick?’*

Five stares at her.

The thought of confronting Klaus is only marginally less terrifying than the thought of attempting to time-travel home right this very second with no advance preparation. He can feel his insides shrink back from the prospect, his breath coming up short. He wants to deny Delores’ words, he wants to stay frozen in this moment forever, because even if it’s a terrible moment at least then it wouldn’t depend entirely on him whether it gets better. He already has

one burden like that, and even if it's one he took up willingly it is so, so heavy. He doesn't want another.

Five blinks away more tears.

"I'll talk to him," he says.

Delores breathes out. '*Good,*' she says. '*That's good.*'

It takes Five nearly fifteen minutes to find Klaus. Or, rather, it takes him nearly fifteen minutes to pull himself out of bed, hobble out into the hallway, and drag-scoot his way around the base (he cannot fucking wait until he heals all the way) until Klaus reappears in front of him, looking deeply terrified.

"Five, what are you *doing*, you should have called me, oh god did you call me, did I not hear you? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry -"

Klaus looks fucking terrible. There's really no wiggle room to say otherwise. He's clearly been crying, and even if his magic makeup can't smudge it looks like it really wants to. His hair is a mess, as if he's been tugging or yanking on it, and his skin is waxy and wan. Five has seen him look like this a single-digit number of times, and he realizes that all of those times can be traced back to Five himself. It's not a pleasant realization.

"Klaus," Five interrupts him. "It's fine. I didn't call for you. I decided to find you on my own."

Now Klaus looks deeply confused, instead. Five decides to call that progress. Tiny, infestimal progress, but progress nonetheless. He's worked with less.

"I wanted to talk," Five says, and tries not to let how terrified he is of that sentence.

When he gets back home, he is making sure all of his siblings get an education in *how to communicate with each other*. It's a goal in the same general weight class as averting the apocalypse, but never let it be said Number Five Hargreeves aims low. Plus, this is just fucking ridiculous.

"....Talk?" Klaus says, uncertainly.

"Yes," Five says. He sets his jaw, and he knows he's a shit liar but he musters all of his acting ability to pretend that he definitely knows what he's doing. Maybe he'll convince himself.

Klaus' eyes flick over Five in what's become a very familiar check-up. Five waits (mostly) patiently for Klaus to reassure himself that Five is not going to die of internal bleeding in the next minute.

"...Should we move to the common room?" Klaus asks. His right hand is toying with the hem of his shirt, and his other hand is nervously skittering across the floor, nails scraping on concrete.

“No,” Five says. He knows he’ll latch on to any possible way to delay this longer, and he can’t do that anymore. He fucking can’t. “Right here.”

“Oh. Um, okay.” Klaus flicks his eyes to Five’s face, then quickly away. “So - so what do....”

“I don’t hate you.”

The words slam into the space between them with the force of a sledgehammer, with much the same effect. Klaus jerks back so sharply he falls on his ass, and ends up blinking at Five confusedly from a mess of fabric and limbs.

That confusion hurts more than Five expected.

It’s not....he’s not *that* bad, surely? Klaus must know, on some level, even if it’s not conscious, that Five doesn’t hate him. Could never *hate* him.

Right?

“....Um.” Klaus says. “Are - are you sure ab-”

“*I don’t hate you,*” Five interrupts. He can’t let Klaus finish that sentence, he *can’t*, he’s not sure he’d survive. Five keeps talking, because if he’s talking then Klaus isn’t and that’s looking like the option that won’t send him into a spiraling pit of self-loathing. “I don’t hate you, I swear. I could never hate you, you’re my *brother*, I was just angry and frustrated and I took it out on you and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I’ve been trying to push away the fact that my arm is gone now and I didn’t think about how it would be affecting you to have taken it off and I should have, that must have fucking *sucked* and I didn’t even ask if you were okay, I’m sorry. And maybe I could have stopped the blizzard incident from happening if I asked *why* you were so obsessed with medicine and we talked about it and helped you understand that I’m not going to drop dead if you look at me wrong. And I’m sorry for picking those fights - I know I apologized for them before, but then I just went and did it again and that’s not going to happen this time, I promise. I’m sorry I made you think I hate you, I don’t, I promise, you’re my brother and I love you.”

Five stops talking and tries to pull in more air than his lungs can physically hold. He didn’t plan on saying all of that in one breath, but it insisted on being said as quickly as possible, and he agreed. Klaus - oh god, Klaus really thought Five hated him. He genuinely thought that.

Five’s eyesight is blurred to the point where he can’t see Klaus, but he hears the quiet, stunned, “Oh,” well enough. It makes things blurrier.

Five realizes, dully, that this is the first time he’s ever told Klaus ‘I love you.’ He’s said it to Delores, and his siblings buried in the ground, but not to Klaus. Not once in all the nineteen years he’s been alive.

Five has lost track of how many times Klaus has said ‘I love you.’

“I love you,” Five repeats, and promises he’ll lose track of that as well.

Chapter End Notes

Which is where I admit that this entire story may or may not just actually be a way to get Five to tell Klaus he loves him, because I was sad he didn't say it back in canon.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Winter crawls by. It's always a drag, but this year especially. Five can't really go outside - or when he can, Klaus has to mostly-carry him and he can't really do much besides sit around. On the plus side, Klaus makes a fabulous snow throne for him, which is well-received.

They work through things. Some things are harder than others, and Klaus still gets the overwhelming urge to make sure they have some random medical textbook or check on Five at three in the morning, but he's....managing. He's getting better.

Especially since Five seems to have made it his personal mission (a bit below the one about returning to the past, but above the one about worshipping at the altar of math, which means he's *serious* about it) to make sure Klaus knows that he is absolutely not hated. Irritating and annoying, sure, but Klaus knew *that*, and takes a certain kind of pride in it.

After nearly six years, Five is finally *initiating* hugs. Klaus isn't sure whether to freak out, congratulate himself, or search the wasteland for the rest of Earth's new race of pod people. He eventually decides to go with the second option, along with cracking a few jokes to Five that he's a bit late in displaying the signs of the apocalypse.

"Shut up," Five says into his shoulder. He's nearly as tall as Klaus now. It's weird, kind of, but Klaus is the one who doesn't age here. It stands to reason that Five would get taller. He might be done growing by now, though. Klaus isn't really sure about when growing stops; most of his teens are a pleasantly blurry haze interspersed with gunshots.

"Never," Klaus replies cheerfully, hugging back. "Love you, bro."

"Love you," Five mumbles back. He's still fairly uncomfortable with saying it, but he seems determined to get used to it through sheer repetition. Klaus isn't really arguing. He can't remember anyone ever saying that to him before, even Ben. Klaus knew Ben loved him (it was the only explanation for why he stuck around, frankly), but he never actually *said* it. Klaus never really thought about it much before, but now he figures that Ben figured he didn't need *another* addiction, because Klaus knows addictions and, well. He's hooked. Completely and totally.

Klaus squeezes tighter for a moment before letting go. He keeps an arm looped around Five's shoulder, and between that and the cane Five can walk mostly normally. They shuffle forward to the door. Klaus opens it, and there's the obligatory blast of frigid winter air.

Five takes a deep breath, and smiles a little. Klaus agrees. He isn't really the best person to notice atmosphere fluctuations, but the basement does get unbearably stuffy at times. The sharp scent of snow is just what the doctor ordered - Klaus should know, being the closest thing to a doctor they have, and the one who ordered it.

They move outside, and leave the door open a crack. The day is clear and cloudless, the snow fresh and white. Klaus can't remember ever seeing a sight like this when he was alive.

After getting Five situated on his snow throne, Klaus steps back and claps his hands. "Hey! You know, it's almost February."

Five frowns at him. "Yes...?"

"Well," Klaus says. "Somehow I suspect you haven't snuck out and gotten Delores a Valentine's Day present."

Five freezes as solid as his snow throne. "Oh, god."

"Relax, relax!" Klaus waves his hands. "There's still time! You're alright!"

"No, I'm not!" Five looks agitatedly towards the entrance. "This is only our second Valentine's Day together, and I already missed our first anniversary. What is she going to say?"

"Uh," Klaus cocks his head. "She'll say she's just happy that you survived your injuries, and she doesn't need fancy gifts because your heart is the only gift she'll ever ask for, or something like that because you two are absurdly sappy. I'm going to have to learn to diagnose and treat your eventual diabetes, just watch."

Klaus gets to see Five flush an extremely deep shade of red, which is always entertaining. Five swallows and tries to pretend he didn't hear Klaus.

"Well," Five says, manfully ignoring Klaus' grin. "That - ah, that is possible. But I still want to get her something. Last year we just sat outside and watched the sunset with some wine, that was nice."

"That's right, you did!" Klaus claps. "You can do that again!"

Five frowns and worries at his lip. "I don't want to repeat myself...."

"Ah!" Klaus holds up a finger. "But you won't be repeating yourself, you'll be making it a *tradition*."

Five's eyebrows go up, and he looks thoughtful. "*Hmm....*"

"Trust me," Klaus assures him. "Traditions are an important part of any relationship."

"...How would you know that?" Five asks. "You said your longest relationship was three weeks."

"Well, yeah, but he talked about his fiance a lot. And I watched a lot of Dr. Phil in rehab. I'm practically an expert!"

Five stares at him for a few seconds. Then he visibly dismisses the first several comments that come to mind before he settles on saying, "I see."

Klaus sticks his tongue out and resumes pacing around. Just for fun, he puts his left foot on top of the snow but lets his right foot sink in every time he takes a step. Looking back, a line of right-footed steps trails behind him. Klaus then goes back to where he began and starts making line of left-footed steps parallel to the first, six feet apart.

“I think I will,” Five decides. “Make it a tradition, I mean. That would be - nice.”

“Oh, excellent!” Klaus chirps. He stands back and surveys his work. The footprints lead away from the library, and appear to belong to a giant with very small feet. Klaus decides he can do better, and searches for a patch of undisturbed snow.

Five hums and leans back in his throne A strong breeze blows by, and ruffles Klaus’ hair. He swipes at it and absentmindedly holds it in place with a bit of energy. Then he starts wondering whether he might be able to change his hairstyle. It’s an interesting thought. He’s gotten a *lot* of mileage out of his unlimited wardrobe - five years in and he’s barely run through half of his ideas so far. New hairstyles could offer him enough material to last for the rest of forever. But he likes his current hair....

Klaus debates the pros and cons as he makes an elaborate sculpture that ends up being a reconstruction of the Sydney Opera House. It’s interesting, especially since Klaus has never actually seen the Sydney Opera House. He might have seen a photo once, when they were learning about famous landmarks, but that was when they were like eight, so Klaus might be getting it mixed up with the Empire State Building. There are certainly a lot of battlements for an opera house.

“Hey, what do you think of -” Klaus says, turning to Five, only to cut himself off.

Five is slumped over on his snow throne in what looks like a very uncomfortable position. He’s managed to fall asleep anyways, breath slowly melting the arm of the throne. The hood of his coat is pulled up, and the fake fur brushes against his nose now and then, prompting him to wrinkle up his face and snort a little. He looks both ridiculous and adorable, and Klaus has never wished for a camera as much as he does now.

Klaus prevents himself from cooing through sheer force of will as he makes his way over to Five. He leans down to get a better look.

Five burrows deeper into his coat, until only a sliver of his face is visible. He looks like a baby koala bear. Klaus grins.

“And that,” Klaus whispers to Five, “is Blackmail Moment Number 2,976.”

Five mumbles a little in his sleep. Klaus grins wider.

“Alright,” he says. “Let’s get you inside before you become a Fivesicle.”

Klaus scoops his brother up. Five is heavy enough now that he has to draw from his reserves to comfortably carry him, and Klaus thinks nostalgically of the time when he was a tiny teenager and was much more travel-sized. Of course, he was also a lot less inclined to *let* Klaus carry him back then, so that was a different problem. Bedtime was certainly never dull.

“You know,” Klaus says conversationally, making sure to prevent his voice from being audible to human ears, “The one good thing about this whole mess is that you don’t argue about sleeping anymore. Or, well, I guess you complain a lot, but you can’t argue that you don’t need it. I’ve been trying to figure out a way to keep that part once you heal up all the way, but so far no dice. I don’t suppose you can stay this agreeable forever?”

Five mumbles something that sounds suspiciously like a fragment of pi, and burrows deeper into Klaus’ chest.

“Yeah, wishful thinking,” Klaus sighs, and nudges open the door to Five’s room.

Five is far more clingy than he has any right to be, considering he only has one arm. It takes Klaus several minutes to get untangled, and then he smacks himself when he realizes he could have just dropped out of corporeality. He resolves to never mention this little adventure to anyone.

Klaus quickly checks over Five, and forces himself to pull away when he confirms that none of the bandages are agitated. He reminds himself that things are fine, and nothing is wrong if it doesn’t look wrong. Five is okay, and he’s going to stay that way.

Klaus breathes deeply for a few seconds, and relaxes.

“I’ll be talking to Delores,” he says to Five. He waves goodbye. “Love you, Five.”

Five mumbles something again, and Klaus chooses to believe he says it back. He smiles all the way to the common room.

Chapter End Notes

My apology for last week. Is it acceptable?

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I posted chapters 7 & 8 of 'it comes and goes' yesterday, check it out!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Five trudges down the street. “Remind me why we’re doing this again?” he sighs.

“Because!” Klaus throws up his arms. “It is a celebration of life and love and happiness, something to mark the momentous occasion that has come to pass. I wanted to do something special.”

“I wasn’t thinking of doing *this* for my birthday,” Five argues.

“Oh, no,” Klaus waves a hand. “This is for me. I’m celebrating the end of prime numbers for the foreseeable future.”

Five snorts. “You’re turning thirty-seven next year.”

“And you can bet that I will ignore that!” Klaus skips over a chunk of rubble. “I’m not *really* thirty-six anyways. Eternally twenty-nine, that’s me! I’ve found the key to immortality, and I’m not sharing. You, on the other hand, have grey hair and wrinkles to look forward to.”

“One day,” Five shrugs. “And you know twenty-nine is a prime number, too.”

Klaus stops and frowns at Five, and begins counting on his fingers.

“....Son of a *bitch*,” he says after a moment.

Five laughs. The sound rings out across the landscape, bouncing off the ruins. It’s a strange sound to hear in the apocalypse, but Five has grown accustomed to a lot of things he never thought he would before.

The stump of his right arm pokes out from the cut-off sleeve of his jacket. The air isn’t very chilly, but it’s best to be prepared. There are still times when he looks over at it and feels a lurch of surprise and discomfort, but he’s growing used to it. Klaus looks less haunted now, when he sees it.

They’re adjusting.

“Here?” Five says, coming to a stop. He looks around. The buildings are more or less all leveled, a few lone brave walls rising above head height.

“Yeah,” Klaus stops too, and Five notices him twisting the edge of his shirt.

Five looks around again. “It’s good,” he offers.

“Yeah,” Klaus says again. There’s a distant look in his eyes. He turns around slowly.

“...We don’t have to, you know,” Five says after a moment. “It’s okay if you aren’t ready. I don’t really remember it, so...”

Klaus shakes himself. “No,” he says. “I don’t want to put it off. And it’s been a year, and you’re all healed up and blinky again, so now’s a good a time as any.”

“If you call me ‘blinky’ again I’ll stab you,” Five informs him. He teleports several feet to the side. “But yeah, I’m good to go if you are.”

It took several months to retrain himself in his powers - losing an arm made it so that his aim was thrown just slightly off, and he still has to deliberately *think* about accounting for it every time he jumps. But it’s slowly becoming more and more of a second nature, and he estimates that he’ll be able to jump with the same thoughtless ease he’s used to within the year.

Klaus nods slowly. “Okay,” he says. “Yeah.”

Then he lunges forward and manages to tap Five’s shoulder before he can jump away. “Tag, you’re It!”

Before Five can retaliate, he’s gone.

Five hisses in rage, before spinning around and scanning the street. Klaus reappears about forty feet away, blows him a kiss, and ducks behind a crumbling wall.

Naturally, jumping behind the wall yields nothing. Five darts around the rubble, twisting his head to look for any hint of movement.

It’s a different playing field than normal - for one thing, it’s much more open. There’s nothing that towers more than a foot or so above his head. It took Klaus months to come around to the idea of playing Ghost Tag again, and he flatly vetoed anywhere with any kind of ruins that might be able to fall over. Five can’t say he isn’t relieved about that. If they ever manage to work their way up to a more diverse playing field again, he plans to check it over for *weeks* before the first game.

But right now, he has to stay vigilant. Klaus is at a disadvantage, since he has to stay visible when he’s more than twenty feet from Five, but Five has found that he’s startlingly good at hiding. Chances are, he’s found somewhere to hole up. On the other hand, that would be very boring, and if there’s one thing Klaus hates it’s boredom. They haven’t played in a year, hiding the whole time would be honestly *disappointing*.

Five jumps to a clear spot, and then to another. He’s exposed, but hopefully the rapid relocation will let him catch a glimpse of Klaus *somewhere*. If he isn’t hiding, then there’s only so many places he can run to.

On the third jump, Five gets lucky. He lands in another clear spot, and hears a choked-off noise of surprise behind him. He whirls around just in time to see Klaus disappearing, fifteen feet away from him.

Five wastes no time. He jumps past the wall in his way and lands on a flat piece of concrete and drywall laid out at an angle. He runs up the incline and peeks over back to where he jumped away from.

Sure enough, Klaus rematerializes near the edge of the clear spot and looks around nervously. Rules clearly state that he can only be invisible if he *knows* he's within twenty feet of Five.

Five seizes his moment. One quick jump and -

"Tag!" he says triumphantly, and promptly jumps as far away as he can.

Five has better spatial orienting than most people, but even he can get dizzy after too many jumps. Along with that, he can feel himself approaching his limit. He probably has a couple good jumps left in him, before he has to rest for at least ten minutes or so.

He decides to find a hiding place. He hardly ever does that, so it should be unexpected, and he *is* supposed to be pacing himself.

Searching is a fraught experience. Five discovers the downsides of being in an exposed space when he's *not* It. Twice he has to jump away at the slightest whisper of sound, and he's not even sure Klaus was there. It's always nervewracking when Klaus is It. Five attributes at least a third of his paranoia to playing Ghost Tag.

Finally, he finds a spot. He holes up under what probably used to be an adult bookstore, beneath two fallen shelves that form a tiny pocket. In a burst of black humor, he finds himself thinking it's a good thing his arm is gone, because it's a *very* tight fit.

Five waits, and counts the seconds.

It's eight minutes later when Klaus finally finds him. Five is recovered enough to jump again by then, and does so. Staying in such a cramped position for so long was probably a bad idea, though, because he stumbles upon landing and takes a hair too long to get rid of the pins-and-needles feeling in his limbs.

"Tag!" Klaus calls as he taps Five's back. Five curses and jumps again.

They play for two more hours before calling it quits. By the end, Five is sweaty and exhausted and completely unable to muster even the slightest amount of focus to jump. He's also grinning larger than he can remember doing anytime in the past year.

That doesn't mean he doesn't flip off Klaus when his brother grins back at him, perfectly clean and sweat-free.

"I will punch you," Five says as he collapses on the dusty ground. He squints up at Klaus. "I really will. Can't you at least *look* tired?"

“But *Five*,” Klaus says, wide-eyed, putting a hand over his heart. “That would be *lying*.”

“Fuck you,” Five says. He stretches, and groans as his back pops.

“No, that’s going to be other-me,” Klaus says cheerfully.

Five rolls his head to look up at him. “What?” he says, when he can’t parse the meaning of Klaus’ words.

Klaus looks very seriously at Five. “*Mein lieber bruder*,” he says, leaning forward. “If you think I’m going to go back in time to meet my past self and we *aren’t* going to fuck, you have misunderstood some very fundamental things about me.”

Five processes that for several seconds. Then he promptly decides that nothing of note happened in the past minute and deletes it from existence.

“When do you want to play Ghost Tag again?” he asks.

Klaus grins at him with smug amusement. Five has no idea why, and conveys this through trying to set Klaus on fire with his mind.

“Hm,” Klaus says, putting his hands in his pockets and rocking back and forth. He looks out over the landscape, which means Five can stop glaring. “I dunno. Next week, maybe?”

“Okay,” Five says. “That sounds good. I think we should head back now, though. Delores will be worrying soon.”

Klaus cocks his head. “Are you going to get up?”

“No,” Five says. He lifts his arm in a silent demand.

Klaus laughs, and kneels down next to Five. Five hooks his arm around his brother’s neck, and Klaus stands up with Five riding piggyback.

“Standard blackmail threat applies,” Five says, as they set off. He rests his head on Klaus’ shoulder.

“Naturally,” Klaus says, mirth dripping from his voice. “Evisceration, stabbing, disincorporation, all of that.”

“I *have* made progress on that, you aren’t invincible,” Five threatens.

“Never said I was,” Klaus says brightly. “But I would just like to note, for the record, that I have over three thousand items to blackmail you with, and my guess is that you have far fewer ways to retaliate.”

Five huffs, and turns to watch the landscape going by. Klaus is going slowly enough that he can pick out individual bits of rubble layered on top of each other, rebar twisting out of several chunks like feelers. There isn’t a single standing building in this part of town, just devastation as far as the eye can see.

Five looks up at the sky. There's several hours of daylight left. He thinks of the quiet dinner he's going to have with Delores to celebrate their anniversary, and the outdoor party Klaus insisted on throwing for their birthday. He thinks of how he'll dance with Delores, one of those slow waltzes she really likes. He thinks of the days stretching out in front of them, rife with possibility.

"Love you, Klaus," Five says.

Klaus' hand reaches up to squeeze his own. "Love you too, Five."

Chapter End Notes

This one isn't even for you all, I just really wanted them to play Ghost Tag again.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The markers are still standing. Klaus isn't sure how. It's not like tiny, grieving Five made them with durability in mind. But here they are, tattered cloth tied to metal poles, marking out the only graves in the apocalypse.

Klaus reaches out and gently brushes a hand against his own. The cloth - really a rag at this point, and that's being generous - flutters away from his fingers.

"Hey, guys," Klaus says.

The area is silent as - well.

"Five is coming," Klaus says. "I came ahead a bit. Just wanted to say hi. And happy birthday."

Klaus tips his head back and looks at the sky. It's overcast, but doesn't look like rain. That's good. They can stay for as long as they want. Delores told them she was fine with staying behind, and not to worry about how long they're gone. They'll probably be back by dawn, but maybe not.

"Luther," Klaus says. "You'll appreciate this. Five finally got the car up and running again. Turns out it was an issue with the valves, or something. I'm still of the opinion that it's cursed, but don't tell Five that."

Luther's marker is the tallest. Five said that he did it on purpose, but Klaus watched him do it, back before he knew he could materialize, and he's pretty sure it's a coincidence. Five was crying too hard to notice the lengths of the poles he was using.

("Why isn't Vanya's the shortest, then?" Klaus asks.

"Shut up," Five says, burrowing deeper into his side. The wind whistles over the rocks.)

"Diego," Klaus turns a bit. "Yes, we brought knives. And a gun. There's *still* nothing to use them on, but Five insisted. You two always were unhealthily obsessed with sharp things."

Diego's marker is the most precarious, but it's still hanging in there. There's what might be a vague scrap of cloth tied to it, and it's leaning over at a nearly forty-degree angle. Five might or might not want to fix it. Klaus isn't sure himself.

("We can decide next time," Klaus says.

"Yeah," Five says, turning away. He closes his eyes.)

“Allison,” Klaus looks at the third marker. “I know I promised to get him to eat better, but it’s like fighting with a cranky toddler, which I know you have experience with so don’t tell me it’s easy. I had to stop him from eating a Twinkie two months ago. He tried to argue that they don’t have a shelf life, but I know firsthand that that’s not true. I had to use very small words, it’s terrible. I’ll keep trying, though.”

Allison’s marker has one of her favorite skirts tied to it. It was Klaus’ favorite as well, which is why he’s wearing a replica right now. Of course, the skirt on the pole is so worn you couldn’t tell it used to be one unless you saw it being put on there.

(“Nice dress,” Five says, when he sees it.

“Danke,” Klaus says, swishing the fabric. They share a solemn, bittersweet look.)

“Vanya,” Klaus says, facing the last marker. “I promise I’m taking care of him. He’s okay, so don’t think he’s just saying that when he tells you he is. It’s actually true. There was a scare with a fever about four months ago, but he came through okay.”

Since Five never found her body, he didn’t put up her marker (or Ben’s) until three months after his arrival into the apocalypse. As a result, hers has more care put into it. It’s still standing tall and strong, the only monument untouched by the desolation around them.

(“She’s going to be the last one standing, just you watch,” Klaus says.

“Well, she was always my favorite,” Five shoots back. He stares to the marker with a mixture of sorrow and desperate, bone-deep love.)

Slowly, Klaus turns to the marker standing next to his own. It was also built with more care, but it was put in a spot that shifted over time and now it’s nearly as precarious as Diego’s. The cloth hangs down from the top at about chest level, the pole tilted heavily.

“Ben,” Klaus says. “....Hey. I - uh.”

A slight breeze sets the cloth swaying gently.

“Yeah,” Klaus swallows. “Yeah.”

(“Aren’t you going to say anything to him?”

“He knows it all already.”)

Klaus looks around at the graves. He sighs. The wind brushes by again.

“Happy birthday, everyone,” he says.

“Hey,” Five calls out, “I wanted to say it first.”

Klaus turns, and smiles at Five. “Then you should have gotten here faster, old-timer,” he says.

Five snorts. “I’m thirty-one, Klaus, not a senior citizen.”

“Oh?” Klaus raises an eyebrow. “Seems to me you’re the oldest person in the world.”

Five rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, you immortal bastard.”

Klaus grins, and tries not to be obvious about the way he’s staring. Five has aged shockingly well for a post-apocalyptic survivor, which Klaus puts down entirely due to his own efforts to prevent his brother from gaining grey hairs a moment sooner than he has to. His face is still smooth and unlined, except for that one wrinkle on his forehead he got from frowning at his equations so much. His missing arm is now a familiar sight, and Klaus barely even thinks about it anymore.

Five is thirty-one, now. Klaus tries to memorize him, every movement and line, because he’s thirty-one and older than Klaus and will soon look like it. Next year he’ll be thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four and on and on until his hair is completely grey and he’s hunched over, his hand gnarled and face wrinkled. The ruins around them are unchanged, the graves exactly the same as they were last year, and Klaus is eternally, forever young. In the entire world, Five is the only thing growing older.

“Hey, everyone,” Five says to the graves. “I hope he hasn’t been talking your ears off. I’m here to save you.”

Klaus huffs. “I get no respect.”

“You get precisely as much as you deserve,” Five says. He looks back at the graves and sighs. “There was another setback. A misplaced number - I don’t know how it happened, but I had to undo eight months of work. It’s still going to be a while until we can get back. I’m sorry.”

Typically, he elides over the epic meltdown that occurred when he realized the error. Klaus spent *weeks* pulling Five out of his funk, and gave serious thought to figuring out how to deafen himself.

“Looks like this won’t be our last birthday chat after all,” Klaus says brightly. His heart twists at that, for reasons similar and dissimilar to Five’s.

It was hard on Five. He’d been so certain he was closing in on the answer. Last year he had to deal with the fact that he was now older than his siblings had ever been, and most of their visit was spent crying. He’d promised them that he’d get it done by next year.

“Yeah,” Five says, quietly. Klaus hugs him. Five hugs back, and they stand there for a minute or so, in the still evening air.

Five sniffs a bit, and steps back. “So,” he says, with a small smile. “Have you told them about being prime number buddies yet?”

Klaus groans. “No,” he says. “I have *not*, because that is *not a real thing*. I refuse.”

“Thirty-one and either twenty-nine or forty-seven, it’s true both ways,” Five says. He’s grinning now, the smug bastard.

“Nope,” Klaus puts his hands over his ears. “Lalalala, I can’t hear you ~”

“You keep denying it, but it doesn’t become less true,” Five says.

Klaus shoots him a dirty look and sticks his tongue out. It’s not mature, but he’s never cared about *that*.

Five raises an eyebrow, and sits down on the ground in front of the graves. He looks at them, and his expression fades into a lost, melancholy one.

Klaus sits next to him, shoulders bumping. “Hey,” he says. “You’ll get it. It’s alright.”

“I know,” Five says. His expression doesn’t change.

Klaus pulls him into a hug. Five doesn’t resist.

“I know we agreed on two days,” Five says after a while. “But could we....”

“Of course,” Klaus says. “I haven’t seen the old base in ages.”

Coming back to their home city every year to visit their siblings isn’t really very practical. They stripped it of essentially all of its supplies years ago, and moved. Not to the next-closest city - that one was built on a reservoir, and flooded over a decade ago. It’s basically a swamp now, and Klaus isn’t letting Five *near* that breeding ground of insects and disease.

So they moved to the next city over, and that one is a four-day trip by car. It would be faster, but they can’t drive on the actual roads because they’re clogged with dead cars, and their own car breaks down every other hour or so. It’s the least problematic one they could find.

This year, there was an exciting moment where the car drove over an unstable bit of ground and nearly flipped when something gave way. Klaus has rarely moved so fast, and briefly impersonated Luther so he could push the car back onto stable ground. It was the first time he’s had to slip out of corporeality to recover in years.

No, it really isn’t very practical.

Neither of them suggests they stop coming, though.

They sit next to the graves in silence for a while, until the sun goes down. Klaus doesn’t let go of Five, and Five doesn’t move his eyes off the markers. Klaus wonders if he’s talking to them.

Eventually, Five stirs. Klaus lets go without protest. Five straightens up and looks at the sky.

“We should get back to Delores,” he says. “Bye, everyone. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

Klaus waves goodbye (left hand), and he follows Five back the way they came.

“It’ll be nice to see the library again,” Klaus muses as he picks his way past rubble. The moon isn’t all that bright tonight, which is very rude of it, so they have to squint to make out

the clear spots.

“Nostalgic,” Five says, and Klaus sees a small quirk of his lips. Oh, good, he’s not *really* depressed, just kinda depressed. That makes things easier.

“Yeah,” Klaus says, smiling. “We can look at your old -”

And then there’s a man.

He’s tall, taller than Klaus, and he has sandy hair and a surfer’s tan, and a shark-tooth necklace and blue eyes and blood dripping from a hole in his chest and an outstretched hand that brushes against Klaus and a low, guttering moan that rips straight out of his throat and -

- Klaus *screams*, half out of fear and half out of shock, and he jerks back and falls to the ground and loses his hold on visibility and -

- Five’s head whips around so fast Klaus can hear his neck pop and he snaps out “*Klaus?*” because he’s never heard Klaus scream like that, not once in eighteen years but -

- Klaus knows that scream even before his brain catches up to him, because he spent twenty-nine years holding it in his throat every time he turned around and his body knows what to do before he even realizes what’s going on because -

- in front of him is a ghost, a *fucking ghost*, something he hasn’t seen in nearly two decades, something he thought he might have forgotten, but now he realizes he was so fucking naive to think so because his heart is pounding and his lungs are frozen and it’s *staring* and -

“*Klaus!*”

- Five is looking around frantically and Klaus gets hit with a bucket of ice water because he stopped being corporeal and Five *doesn’t know* and it’s getting closer and -

- he forces himself into visibility and stutters out “G-ghost - *ghost* -” pointing at it and -

- there’s *another* one, a young woman in Victorian dress and a slashed throat, peering at him and opening her mouth and -

- *another* one, a man in a bloodstained lab coat and -

“Klaus, what do you mean, what -”

- a little girl with sad brown eyes and tire tracks on her chest -

- an old woman with blue cheeks -

- a woman with a lace veil -

- a teenage boy with half a face -

- a man with a severed arm gushing blood -

“Hello, boys.”

Five whirls around, and Klaus doesn’t understand at first, not until the woman with the lace veil smiles at them and Five bellows out “*Who are you?*”

The woman’s smile grows wider.

“I’m the Handler.” She lifts up the veil. “And I have a proposition for you two.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap!

The next story will begin posting in a week, I consider it even better than this one so you can all pre-emptively compliment me if you wish.

Thank you all so very much for all your support, I couldn't have done it without you!

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